

Sermon for SJB Baptism of Christ according to Mark 10 Jan 2021

The difficult decision to suspend our church services at the start of this current severe lockdown has been taken with very heavy hearts, but there's no getting away from the gravity of the current situation. The alarming rise in the number of covid cases, the NHS stretched almost to the point of collapse and the strong recommendation to stay at home as far as humanly possible, made it the only responsible decision to take.

At this point it would be all too easy to be downcast.

But, amidst the gloom let's try to remember, if we can, that today like every other is a new day. 2021 is a new year, and vaccines are on the way.

New hope and new beginnings are at the heart of our faith, and our readings today, by a wonderful coincidence, major on new beginnings.

First we heard the Genesis account of God's initiative in the creation of a brand new world, a world where light came out of darkness. Next we heard two readings about baptism, surely the most important new beginning we could ever hope for, a new beginning that offers the possibility of endless new beginnings, day by day, throughout our whole lives.

Today in our gospel reading we're confronted with John the Baptist again. We thought about him only a few weeks ago during Advent, calling the people of God to repentance through baptism in the river Jordan in preparation for the coming of the messiah. We were reminded that repentance is translated from a Greek word meaning to change direction. John is calling the people to turn away from whatever has come between them and God and turn back to Him. As a sign of this new direction they're baptised, dipped down deep into the waters of the Jordan, the river that has featured so strongly throughout their history. Now this Jordan water is to be a sign to them of inner cleansing. In this way they are being prepared for something new, getting them ready to meet the one they've been promised by various prophets for centuries.

In today's reading of Mark's account, the promise is fulfilled. Jesus, the anointed one, finally arrives and is proclaimed by John.

So, why does Jesus himself come to John for baptism? He's completely sinless: he doesn't need to repent, to change direction, to be cleansed, to be baptised by John. John declares himself not even worthy to untie Jesus's sandals; he pronounces that Jesus will baptise them with the holy spirit. All true. Of course Jesus doesn't need baptism for himself. He undergoes it, as he undergoes everything, for the sake of humanity, for our sakes. In his human birth, living as part of a humble family, spending thirty years in humdrum work, not being immune from suffering, he identifies fully with our humanity. Here in his baptism he takes that identification to a whole new level. He accepts this inner cleansing ritual although he is totally clean and always will be, in spite of what the authorities will try to say to the contrary later in his ministry. By going through these waters he becomes as one with us and leads the way for us.

So what happens to Jesus as a result of this act of amazing humility? He is spectacularly affirmed by the holy spirit for the start of his three year ministry. He hears God's word to him and experiences the Holy spirit descending on him in bodily form. This will strengthen and sustain him on the hard road ahead. In the very next verse following today's reading Mark tells us that having been spiritually wonderfully affirmed, Jesus is immediately driven by the same spirit into the desert to be severely tested. But that's for another time. Today our focus is on baptism, a new beginning.

Mark's three short sentences telling how Jesus's ministry is kick-started are clearly carefully chosen, the heavens torn apart, the dove descending and the voice with those wonderful words of affirmation- -you are my son, the beloved with you I am well pleased.

The announcement “you are my son,” is one of three moments in the gospel where Jesus is proclaimed “son”— here at his baptism, again at the transfiguration where his closest disciples see him in glory and finally at the crucifixion. Mark sets up echoes between Jesus’s baptism and his crucifixion. He uses the word schizo meaning “torn open”, not only here about the heavens. It comes powerfully once again when as Jesus dies, the veil in the temple that separates off the holy of holies is torn apart from top to bottom. At another key point in the gospel, where James and John request to sit at Jesus right and left hand, Jesus himself connects his baptism with his suffering and death. He asks them: “are you able to drink the cup that I drink, or be baptized with the baptism with which I am baptized?”

Yes, when we are baptised into the life of Jesus, it’s into his whole life, including his death and resurrection. Suffering and loss are sewn into the very fabric of this way of life.

On pilgrimage in the Holyland on the banks of the Jordan we witnessed crowds of people being baptised, many in white robes. They were being dipped right under the water, then rising up into the sunlight, their faces shining with joy, a dramatic re-enactment of dying to the old life and rising to the new. Our own baptismal rite with water being poured over the head is not so dramatic, but the significance is just the same. At first baptism was only for those who actively desired it but later when Christians were persecuted and life became very precarious, the practice of baptising infants began. This gave them godparents who could help to nurture them in the faith and even take over if their parents were no longer there. We continue to baptise them so they can be fully part of this new life from the very beginning. I guess most of us were baptised as babies and confirmed later, but it’s never too late to be baptised.

I will never forget the overwhelming joy of one dear lady, Beatrice. who was baptised at the age of seventy. When I was attending a cancer day centre years ago I used to take a service of home communion for the other patients. One day, Beatrice, who always attended the service but never received, confided that she hadn’t been baptised as a baby due to illness. She’d always longed to receive communion but had thought it would never be allowed as you had to be baptised as a baby and she’d missed the boat. I reassured her that it was never too late. She was astonished and absolutely overjoyed. We arranged for her to be baptised by a priest at the day centre with all the patients present and a party to follow. It was such a beautiful and moving occasion. As she was so ill she had the bishop’s permission to receive communion without the need for further confirmation and not longer after that she died.

At his own baptism Jesus is lifted on a great spiritual high. Immediately afterwards he’s cast down into the depths of painful testing in the wilderness. Being the human face of God doesn’t insulate him from anything human beings can experience except that he never gives way to temptation. He struggles with it mightily but he overcomes.

Sometimes we might have the blessing of a spiritual high, a special awareness of God’s presence. Perhaps we might feel a sense of awe, or great inexplicable joy or deep peace, some inner realisation that can inspire us to keep on going in faith. If we do, we rejoice, if we don’t we carry on regardless, At other times there might be desert stretches, or times of intense pain or simply humdrum workaday weeks, months and years. For the sake of all creation Jesus, the human face of god, experienced all of these.

Whatever you are going through right now, remember always that whether or not you can feel it at the moment, you are held in the love of God who in Jesus was born for you, baptised for you, died for you and rose again for you. As he identified with us at his baptism and received the words, “You are my son in whom I delight” he also says to each one of us at our own baptism, “you are my precious son”, “you are my precious daughter,” in whom I delight.

Thanks be to God for this great gift of baptism.

Amen.