

# **The Baptism of Christ**

Acts 8: 14-17

Luke 3: 15-17, 21-22

We are in the middle of celebrating the birth of Christ. We have prepared for it in Advent. Celebrated the birth itself on Christmass Day; the visit of the wise men last Sunday. And on February 2<sup>nd</sup>, forty days after the birth we shall celebrate Jesus's presentation in the Temple. And all this is biblically and historically accurate: we celebrate the events in the order they took place and at the appropriate time intervals. It is as if we were reliving the first forty days of Jesus's life.

And into this historically accurate commemoration the Baptism of Christ sticks out like a sore thumb. Immediately after celebrating Jesus the tiny baby we are plunged into his thirtieth year when he was baptised by John the Baptist in the Jordan. It all seems a little bit odd!

But the reason we do this is that the Church isn't concerned with historical accuracy but with thematic unity. The Epiphany of Jesus end his Baptism are thirty years apart in time – opposite ends of his life – but in some sense they are the same event. The Epiphany is Jesus's first public appearance when he is acknowledged by three wise men from the East representing the gentiles, the people who are not Jews – us!. From that twelfth day of his life he is recognised for who he really is.

And yet in some ways it is a false start. For we know next to nothing of his next thirty years. As far as we know he grew up as a carpenter's son in Nazareth and indeed became a carpenter himself. And not only was it a perfectly ordinary childhood, but quite a human adulthood as well. Until that is he reached the age

of thirty. For it was at that age that Jesus had his first public appearance as an adult.

Jesus did not become the Son of God at his baptism. God did not adopt him at that moment. Jesus was, from the beginning of time, the Son of God, God the Son. But as his baptism he was acknowledged as such as an adult in the words that came from heaven:

You are my son, the Beloved, with you I am well pleased.

And Jesus heard it; as did John the Baptist; and as did all the crowds waiting around. The secret was out. The truth about Jesus was no longer that little family secret shared by Mary and Joseph: it was known to every Tom, Dick and Harry. And more to the point it was now real to Jesus himself. No doubt he had heard from his parents the story of his miraculous conception and the events surrounding his birth. No doubt he had his own inner knowledge that there was more to his nature than simply being human. But from the day of his anointing his nature and his mission were absolutely explicit. There could be no turning back without denying his own self.

There is a prayer that we sometimes use in the Church of England on this day:

May we recognise him as lord  
and know ourselves to be your beloved children.

The focus begins with Jesus and then moves to us and the similarities are pointed out: as Jesus was the Son of God so, in some way, we are also his sons and daughters. But there are similarities too in the way our faith is made public in our baptism and more particularly our confirmation. As I prepared this sermon I thought I had better check up on what is the Methodist

understanding of Confirmation. The Methodist Worship Book says this:

"In Confirmation, those who have been baptized declare their faith in Christ and are Strengthened by the Holy Spirit for continuing discipleship. Confirmation reminds us that we are baptized and that God continues to be at work in our lives: we respond by affirming that we belong to Christ and to the whole People of God. At a Service of Confirmation, baptized Christians are also received into membership of the Methodist Church and take their place as such in a local congregation."

For us too there is no going back. From the day of his baptism Jesus was set apart. And we too are set apart. We are a royal priesthood. We are God's chosen ones on whom his favour rests. But do not mistake the meaning of being chosen. I do not mean we are chosen like being teachers' pets – those for whom God has a soft spot, whose weaknesses he indulges in a sentimental way. I mean that we are chosen in the same way as shock troops to bring in God's kingdom. We are not chosen for indulgence but for work, for service, as was Christ.

That is the meaning of 'being strengthened by the Holy Spirit'. The Holy Spirit is given to equip us for service, to release the gifts that the Father has given us. This is recognized in the Methodist Covenant Service:

I am no longer my own but yours. Put me to what you will, rank me with whom you will; put me to doing, put me to suffering; let me be employed for you, or laid aside for you, exalted for you, or brought low for you; let me be full, let me be empty, let me have all things, let me have nothing: I freely and wholeheartedly yield all things to your pleasure and disposal. And now, glorious and blessed God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, you are mine and I am yours.

In our baptism and our confirmation we became a new creation, we were born again. But the new life needs nurturing, need renewing, needs feeding. The caterpillar needs to become a butterfly. After his baptism, Jesus could have melted back into the daily life of Nazareth. He could, if he had really wished, have denied his calling, have walked away from God.

And so can we. We can allow our moral decisions to be decided by the world rather than by God. Last week a Christian MP was convicted of lying to the Police, perverting the cause of justice. That was not the Holy Spirit at work. We can allow our priorities in using our time and our money to be indistinguishable from those around us. We can simply edge God away from the centre of our lives. And we can do all this while still being in church every Sunday morning.

But we have no reason to do so. No reason to backslide. When Jesus was baptised the Holy Spirit descended on him. When the believers in Acts were baptised in the name of Jesus the Holy Spirit filled them. And we too are anointed with the Holy Spirit and with power. The work of the Holy Spirit is not confined to those Christians who call themselves Charismatic or Pentecostal. On the contrary we all as Christians belong to the Holy Spirit. And whatever the Father asks us to do, the Spirit will give us the gifts. So today, let us each one of us offer our lives afresh to the Spirit and allow his power to fill us.

N Clews  
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Thornbury Methodist Church