

SUNDAY REFLECTIONS

Sunday 10 January 2021 | The Baptism of Christ

TODAY'S READINGS

Genesis 1.1-5 | Psalm 29 | Acts 19.1-7 | Mark 1.4-11



'John the Baptist baptising Christ'
by Greta Leško

✠ In the name of God,
Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

Together we've arrived at the beginning of a new year in rather different circumstances than we would have hoped. The events of recent days have reminded us that we continue to journey through perilous and anxious times and despite aspirations that a new year would mark a new beginning, we continue to be faced with the demands of limitations and restrictions put in place for the common good as we seek to do what we can, however small, for the well-being of each other. The beginning of a mass immunisation programme offers the prospect of better times on the horizon as more and more of the population receive their vaccinations, yet in the meantime we continue to live with the reality of how things are now, seeking to live as confidently and cautiously as we can through the coming times.

Beginnings, as the tradition of new years resolutions remind us, are important; often interpreted as a means of being prompted into a new way of thinking or acting. We might have heard of the traditions such as 'dry January' or 'veganuary' encouraging people to give up alcohol or to turn vegan for the duration of the first month of the year. And as individuals we might have decided that the start of 2021 heralds an opportunity to do something we have been neglecting for too long. It's reported that approximately 80% of new years resolutions fail, a reminder that so often our good intentions can seem less than idyllic when we enter back into what we consider to be the normal routines of life. When remaining committing to what we've promised ourselves can seem all the more difficult. It's quite natural for our initial resolve to become rather diluted and diminished, when the seeming newness of the year and our expectations of it begin to wane.

The beginning of Mark's gospel, as you might know, is rather different from the other three accounts of Jesus' life and ministry. It is widely understood to have been the first gospel set down in writing, dated between 65 and 70 AD, and in the early years of the Christian church was understood in a certain tradition to be a record of the memories of the apostle Peter, set down by the evangelist Mark, recalling the sayings and doings of Jesus.¹

It was this association with Peter, this connection and link to someone who had walked, talked and experienced life alongside Jesus that ensured that the gospel account was preserved for posterity, serving subsequently as a support on which the other gospels could develop. When we read Mark's gospel we have framed in writing some of the earliest recorded eye-witness testimony of Jesus' friends and are taken to the heart of what was most memorable and significant when those companions told others about who Jesus was and how they understood God to be definitively at work in him.

With all this in mind then, it's interesting that the beginning of Mark's account of the good news of Jesus Christ doesn't in fact begin with Jesus at all, but rather his cousin John the Baptist appearing in

¹ Hooker, M., *'The Gospel according to Saint Mark'*, p 5.

the wilderness and proclaiming '*a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins*'. Such was John's popularity that the gospel remarks that '*people from the whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem were going out to him*'. John's ministry didn't elicit a muted response but rather an almost universal desire from his contemporaries to discover what was going on. They left their homes, their places of security and safety and journeyed out into the wilderness, keen to know more of what this charismatic and enigmatic preacher had to offer.

We can note here the significance of John's summons to the people to come out to him in the wilderness, since it was here not in the temple precincts or the in the councils of the mighty that proof of God's judgement and salvation were to be seen. The coming of the Messiah, the Christ, the one who comes as Saviour and Lord was heralded in a hitherto unexpected way. Here on the margins of society, far removed from any allusions of comfort or grandeur, were found the origins of the gospel message, proclaimed in the promise of one who would come to baptize the world and its people with the gift of the Holy Spirit. This was a new beginning, a fresh way of doing things, a fundamental change in the world's fortunes and the proclamation that God's reign and rule was here and that in Jesus it was here to stay.

As the gospel continues we discover that John's message and medium isn't simply over exaggeration or hyperbole, but rather is directing our gaze to the arrival of Jesus from Nazareth in Galilee. Who, like the swarming crowds, comes to John for immersion and cleansing in the Jordan. In the original Greek text the following account of Jesus' baptism is a mere fifty-three words, the noteworthiness of the event vastly disproportionate to its size.² The inaugural moment of Jesus' public ministry communicated to us in relative simplicity despite its cosmic significance as we are told of the heavens being torn open, the Spirit descending like a dove and a voice from heaven proclaiming Jesus' status as the beloved Son of the Father, on whom rested the favour and blessing of God.

It is a spectacular event, even more so when we consider that John, who had just proclaimed his relative inferiority to the one who was coming after him, is called upon to baptise the one whose arrival he had prepared for. This is no quiet or ordinary beginning, but rather a compelling account that with this Jesus of Nazareth things were going to be different, the one empowered by the gift of the Spirit in whom the power of the same Spirit was convincingly at work. All happening in the wilderness, far away from the centre of power or authority, manifesting to the world Jesus' identity, belonging and status as Son of God. As the well-known Epiphany hymn puts in, '*manifest at Jordan's stream; prophet, priest and king supreme*', the rest of Mark's gospel and the events of Jesus' life it describes, flowing out from this explicit statement of who Jesus was and still is.

It was due to the unequivocal importance of this event in Jesus' life and the success of John the Baptist's ministry before his own death, that the need and seriousness of baptism was celebrated by

² cf. Edwards, J.R., '*The Gospel according to Mark*', p 34.

Christ's earliest followers. The early church recognised that it was Jesus' own baptism which set in motion all that followed.³ And so, as we read in the Acts of the Apostles, it quickly became established as the primary means by which belonging to the Christian community was understood. It was through baptism that the church was given a corporate understanding of what it meant to be united together in following the way of Jesus Christ, the Son of the living God; sharing together in what it meant to know the life-giving blessings of his death and resurrection.

As the apostle Paul's experience in Ephesus shows this early understanding of what it meant to be baptised was a little confused. Yet, in talking to the Ephesian disciples Paul focuses their attention on what it means to share in community and communion through Jesus, where the presence and work of the Holy Spirit helps us to be reassured of God's presence. In Christ, the writer of Acts reminds us, a new and everlasting day has dawned, hope is re-born and we are called to share the very life of the one we seek to imitate and follow. As one writer remarks, 'the saving work of God is always new, starting up and again with faith'⁴, so that in baptism we are reminded of our summons to be friends of Jesus and so temples of the Holy Spirit.

We renew this baptismal calling in every prayer we offer, when we search and ask for faith in life's trials and temptations, praying for grace to know the presence of the same anointing Spirit that was with Jesus as he came up out of the waters of the Jordan all those years ago. It is the gift of this same Spirit, given to all believers, to each of us and present in the world in every deed of goodness, holiness and generosity that we pray for with renewed vigour and energy as we look out to the year ahead.

May that Spirit set us each on fire with love for God, with love for each other, as we trust in the Lord of new beginnings to guide and lead us in all that will be.

✠ In the name of God,
Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

³ cf. Acts 1.21-22

⁴ Jennings, W.J., 'Acts', p 184.

The Collect
for the Baptism of Christ

**Eternal Father,
who at the baptism of Jesus
revealed him to be your Son,
anointing him with the Holy Spirit:
grant to us, who are born again by water and the Spirit,
that we may be faithful to our calling as your adopted children;
through Jesus Christ your Son our Lord,
who is alive and reigns with you,
in the unity of the Holy Spirit,
one God, now and for ever.
Amen.**

New Testament Reading

While Apollos was in Corinth, Paul passed through the inland regions and came to Ephesus, where he found some disciples. He said to them, 'Did you receive the Holy Spirit when you became believers?' They replied, 'No, we have not even heard that there is a Holy Spirit.' Then he said, 'Into what then were you baptized?' They answered, 'Into John's baptism.' Paul said, 'John baptized with the baptism of repentance, telling the people to believe in the one who was to come after him, that is, in Jesus.' On hearing this, they were baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus. When Paul had laid his hands on them, the Holy Spirit came upon them, and they spoke in tongues and prophesied— altogether there were about twelve of them.

Acts 19.1-7

Gospel Reading

John the baptizer appeared in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. And people from the whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem were going out to him, and were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins. Now John was clothed with camel's hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey. He proclaimed, 'The one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to stoop down and untie the thong of his sandals. I have baptized you with water; but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.' In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. And just as he was coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on him. And a voice came from heaven, 'You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.'

Mark 1.4-11

Prayers of Intercession
for the Epiphany season

As we worship the Saviour with joy, we make our prayers to our heavenly Father.

The magi came from the east to worship your Son:
Father, grant to us and to Christians everywhere the spirit of adoration.
Lord of glory, hear our prayer.

The infant Christ received gifts of gold, incense and myrrh:
Father, accept the offering of our hearts and minds.
Lord of glory, hear our prayer.

The kingdoms of this world have become
the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ:
Father, grant an abundance of peace to your world and to all your children.
Lord of glory, hear our prayer.

Your Son shared the life of his home and family at Nazareth:
Father, protect in your love our neighbours,
our families and the communities of which we are a part.
Lord of glory, hear our prayer.

The Holy Family lived in exile and in the shadow of death:
Father, look in mercy on all who are poor and powerless, and all who suffer,
May they know comfort, healing and salvation in body, mind and spirit.
Lord of glory, hear our prayer.

We rejoice that your Son, born for us, is the Resurrection and the Life;
Father, console and bless all those who mourn and grieve,
and give to us the promise of your unfading hope that we, with all the departed,
may at the last come to the unending joy of your eternal kingdom.
Lord of glory, hear our prayer.

Father, we rejoice in our fellowship
with the shepherds, the angels, the magi,
the Virgin Mary, Saint Joseph
and all the faithful departed.
In your unfailing love for us and for all people,
hear and answer our prayers through your Son,
our Saviour Jesus Christ.
Amen.

THE SUNDAY SUPPLEMENT

CHURCH OF ENGLAND RESOURCES

<https://www.churchofengland.org/>

<https://soundcloud.com/the-church-of-england>

<https://www.churchofengland.org/prayer-and-worship/join-us-service-daily-prayer>

<https://www.youtube.com/thechurchofengland>

<https://www.youtube.com/c/TheChurchofEngland/videos>



The Church of England Service this week, for this week celebrates Plough Sunday, which is usually commemorated during Epiphany-tide.

The service can be found online here: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=I7i8gvOM_Ck

A NEW YEAR MESSAGE FROM THE BISHOP OF PENRITH

The Bishop of Penrith, the Right Reverend Dr Emma Ineson, has recorded a New Year message for the communities of the Diocese. In her message, Bishop Emma looks at the words of the apostle Paul in Romans 12, encouraging us to find joy in God, to practice patience in this testing period and to be faithful in our lives of prayer. The message can be viewed here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wNPHwyrTXEg>

DAILY HOPE PHONE LINE

The Church of England has developed a national **free** phone line to help support those who might feel particularly isolated at this time, especially if they have no access to the internet. The phone number is **0800 804 8044** and provides a collection of readings, prayers and hymns that can be listened to, all of which are updated regularly. If you know of anyone who might appreciate this service, please do let them know the phone number and pray that it will be a blessing to many.

