

10 Jan 21

Baptism of Christ

Acts 19: 1-7; Mark 1: 4-11

You may not remember your own baptism or christening. I have no memory, just a precious photo of my father holding me so that you can't see any baby, only his face smiling down on the shawl-wrapped bundle in his arms.

Christening is the word often used for baptism when it's a baby, but increasingly now, people are baptised at any age depending on when they join a Christian community and the practices of that church. Some of you may not have been baptised, but please don't switch off, because this is for you too.

Today we will look at Jesus' baptism and consider what it means for us his followers.

In those days Jesus came from Nazareth in Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan.

This is Mark's typically succinct description in our gospel reading, 9 verses into chapter 1, the first 8 verses having told us about John the Baptist. We can assume that Jesus is aware of John's ministry and knows that now is the time for his own to begin.

John, having been out in the desert, is probably on the East Bank of the Jordan. There's symbolism here: the crowds recognise their need to repent and go to John on the far side.

When they are baptised they cross the river and return home to Israel.

Back in Old Testament times, after journeying from Egypt towards the Promised Land, God's people, led by Joshua and the Ark of the Covenant, crossed over the Jordan to take possession of the land. Being in that river is a reminder that they claim God's promise, are rescued from slavery to freedom.

We know however, from our Acts reading and from John's own words, that his baptism is just the preparation- Jesus brings something far greater. The next two verses tell us what, in three powerful signs.

Firstly, as Jesus comes up out of the water having been baptized, *he saw the heavens torn apart*: a foretaste of the glory to which Jesus will return after his resurrection, and where he will one day welcome all those who believe in him.

But this is also a foretaste of what Mark describes fourteen chapters later, when Jesus dies and the curtain in the temple, separating the people from the Holy of Holies, is torn in two, from top to bottom. That's not an accident but a top- down breaking of a huge barrier, so that the way to God is opened. And this great act of reconciliation between God and humanity, which Jesus has come to bring, is announced here as the heavens are torn apart. Jesus the man goes down into the water,

identifying with humanity's sin and need for forgiveness, and comes up drawing us all towards new life and reconciliation with God.

Secondly, the dove descends, the Holy Spirit comes down and hovers above Jesus.

Just so the Spirit hovers over the waters of chaos in the beginning of creation, bringing life. The dove was also the winged envoy sent out by Noah after the great flood, bringing back in its beak the message of salvation

For Jesus here, the dove is the assurance of the Spirit's presence, guidance and strength for all that is to come.

Throughout Mark's gospel as we read it this year, we will see Jesus living in the power of the Spirit, united with his Father in heaven, despite the opposition he faces. At the most pressing times, he's up early to pray, to spend time alone with his Father, still united through the Holy Spirit. Surely an even more vital example for us in these days...

Jesus has promised to send the Holy Spirit to all Christians: we are baptised with water *and* with the Spirit- who makes God real to us and brings hope, purpose and love, as we allow God into our lives. This is a truth we long to know in our hearts as well as our minds, to live seven days a week, not just on Sundays!

The heavens are torn apart, the dove descends and the voice of the Father is heard:

You are my Son, the beloved, with you I am well pleased.

Only in the certainty of this relationship, will Jesus be able to fulfil all he has come to do.

Paralleling this moment, as Mark describes the crucifixion, a centurion, facing Jesus and watching him breathe his last, declares, 'Truly this man was God's Son!' This is the representative of world power and domination recognising that, through Christ's giving of himself, God is revealed.

Within the astonishing trinitarian opening scene of Jesus' ministry, Mark already points to the cross. For that is the way to life, for all the world and for us who are baptised in Christ's name, signed with his cross.

How we need to pray that Christ's self-giving love and power may be revealed through the church at this time, when world powers and dominions are in turmoil.

To conclude, the three signs at Jesus' baptism remind us of all that our baptism signifies:

- the way to heaven is opened,
- the Holy Spirit is given to us,
- and God calls us to be his daughters and sons, secure in his love for eternity.

May we never take this for granted.

As we struggle with the harsh realities of life, in lockdown, isolation separation, we have a Saviour who chose the way of the cross, to bring us life. Our faith isn't an easy or cosy one, but faces up to what is broken in our lives and in our world and offers us costly, true hope.

In a few moments I will lead us in a renewal of our own baptismal vows, which echo all that Jesus did in his life and death and we will be asked again, to follow him.

In the Church of England these words are used both at Baptism and Confirmation, so that those baptised as children can *confirm* the promises made by their parents and godparents.

It's common now also for adults who weren't christened to receive baptism and confirmation in one service.

If you haven't been baptised, or confirmed, do consider it, this year. If you're interested, please get in touch. I'd love to support you as you think this through- we'll provide some times of shared study and preparation. We're hopeful that a confirmation service will take place in a local church with one of our bishops later in the year. For today, please feel free to join in with the words at home, or just listen to the next part of the service.

So as we come to renew our vows, we would usually gather around the font. But today we can be joined by the Holy Spirit as we respond together in our homes.

You'll need the words in your order of service. Please join in the responses with me.

RENEWAL OF BAPTISMAL VOWS follows.