

## **St Brandon's 15 Jan 2023 Baptism of Christ**

**Ps 40: 1-12; I Cor 1: 1-9; John 1: 29-42**

The church's calendar in January always feels a bit topsy turvy.

Last week the Wise Men, part of Christmas though they could have arrived many months after Jesus was born.

At the end of the month, Candlemas, the Feast of the Presentation of Christ in the Temple, forty days after his birth and celebrated around forty days after Christmas. But today, we leap forward thirty years or so to Jesus' baptism and the start of his public ministry

Are you still with me? I hope so, journeying together through the church calendar is a key way of rooting our faith in the historical life of Jesus.

Before we focus on Jesus, please note the first reading, the very start of 1 Corinthians, because in future weeks we will read consecutive chunks from that letter – you might even want to read through the early chapters at home.

Back to the gospel. Whilst our 'gospel for the year' is Matthew, which we read in rotation with Mark and Luke every 3 years, we also hear passages from John, and the contrast is interesting: John wrote his gospel later than the other three and reflects on those earlier accounts with the expressed purpose of enabling those who read it to *see Jesus*, with the eyes of our hearts as well as our minds, and to believe in him.

So how does today's reading from John help us to do that?

It's full of seeing, looking, revealing: therefore we're going to use two pictures to help us. But first, let's set the scene.

We're in John Chapter 1 – which begins with the wonderful prologue we hear read at Christmas. That contains an introduction to John the Baptist's ministry- do you remember? (church Bibles p98)

*There was a man sent from God whose name was John. He came to bear witness to the light- he himself was not the light but he came to testify to the light.*

Some verses later we read what that testimony involves, in Bethany beyond the Jordan, John is baptising. That takes us to verses 28 of Chapter 1.

And then comes today's reading – John and Jesus meet, though not, it turns out, for Jesus's baptism, because that is described as having already taken place. Rather, this is John bearing witness, testifying to who Jesus is, for the eyes and ears of all present, and the next day for his disciples, so they can become followers of Jesus Christ. And what does he say?

LAMB OF GOD PAINTING.

This is *Agnus Dei, the Lamb of God*, by Francisco de Zurbarin, painted in the early 17<sup>th</sup> century. It was part of the Seeing Salvation exhibition at National Gallery in 2000 and I remember looking up at it, much the same size in reality as on our screen, and being deeply moved by it.

In this country, we think of lambs frolicking in the fields in Springtime, but for the Jews, a spotless lamb was a sacrificial necessity, to atone for sins, pay the price of forgiveness and maintain the people's relationship with God.

*Agnus Dei*, the Lamb of God, bound and ready to be sacrificed – shockingly *this* is how John the Baptist describes Jesus, and he makes his meaning very clear.

*Here is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!*

Right here in Chapter 1 of this gospel, Jesus' death is announced.

The Baptist understands sin and forgiveness– he's been preaching and carrying out baptisms of *repentance for the forgiveness of sins*, in the River Jordan, so that when Jesus appears – steps out of his ordinary life as a carpenter and goes public- the people will see who he is. Repentance, that facing up to the mess we've made and turning back to God, is what will enable them to recognise Jesus.

It's just the same for us today – we have to start with repentance.

Perhaps this powerful image can help us, especially as we say and sing parts of our Communion service later.

Next day, two of the Baptist's disciples, already baptised by him, Andrew and another, are standing alongside him when Jesus walks by. John again proclaims – *Agnus Dei! The Lamb of God!* with such force that his disciples leave him and follow Jesus, fulfilling what John has come to do. The two stay with Jesus and become his disciples, most likely numbered among the twelve apostles.

So our first image is the Lamb. The author John wants us to see Jesus as The Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world.

Here's the second: Leonardo Da Vinci's 15th century painting of the Baptism of Christ, SLIDE 2

in which the Dove of the Holy Spirit can be seen clearly, resting on Jesus. I love his portrayal of John the Baptist too, the intimacy of the encounter, the compelling focus of John on Jesus.

John the Baptist sees the Spirit descending like a dove on Jesus, as God has promised him in advance.

He sees the dove and knows this *is* the Son of God, who comes as Lamb of God and is empowered by the Holy Spirit to fulfil all he has come to do.

Jesus will also be the giver of the Holy Spirit, breathing God's power into his followers so *they* can live in God's light and love.

Many artists have portrayed Jesus' baptism, the coming together of the three persons of the Trinity, Father Son and Holy Spirit. John's gospel doesn't record the voice of the Father as the others do, because John is all about seeing – seeing the Holy Spirit as the dove, and as the go-between God linking Jesus on earth with his Father in heaven. This powerful picture is woven into today's passage as the demonstration of who Jesus is and the launchpad to believe and follow him.

Poet Malcolm Guite wrote a beautiful sonnet about Christ's baptism- if you'd like to read it all, ask me at the end.

I'd like to close with the final couplet, about Jesus:

*He calls us too, to step into that river  
To die and rise and live and love forever*

Will you step into that river now, through the Renewal of our own Baptismal Promises?

Please follow Emily and me as we make our way to stand around the font. Or if you prefer, stay in your seat and simply turn towards the font. Please be aware of the camera for livestreaming and either stand out of shot or remain seated, if you don't wish to be visible.

**Please have your leaflet ready.** Everyone is invited to join in the words – I hope you've had a chance to look and the introduction on the front, as well as the warning about getting wet!

