

THE BAPTISM OF THE LORD – YEAR C (2019)

The feast of the Baptism of the Lord, which we are celebrating today, is officially the end of the Christmas season: no longer, as in the past, does the season extend to Christ's Presentation in the Temple at Candlemas; nor do the celebrations end either on Christmas Day itself, nor on the feast of the Epiphany, when we celebrated Christ's revelation to all people. And, if the Christmas tree has gone, the cards have been recycled and the crib figures put safely away for next year, it seems odd that we have jumped thirty years in Jesus' life – last week he was an infant, this week he is thirty years old and about to begin his public ministry.

And yet, it's not so strange: though last week's feast of the Epiphany doesn't have its own liturgical season, its theme continues over the next two Sundays: today we are considering the Baptism of the Lord, and next Sunday we will hear of his first miracle at Cana, in which he turned water into wine. Both of these events are also epiphanies, just as was the visit of the Magi to the Christ child; in Jesus' baptism and his first miracle there is a revelation of who he is and what he is going to be; who he is in relation to God, and what his life and death will mean for us.

Luke's account of Jesus' baptism is itself somewhat strange, indeed Jesus' baptism is almost incidental: 'Now when all the people had been

baptised and while Jesus after his own baptism was at prayer...’ In both Matthew’s and Mark’s accounts of Jesus’ baptism, the Holy Spirit descended on him in the bodily form of a dove as soon as he came up out of the water of the river Jordan; in Luke’s account, however, notice that the Holy Spirit descends as a dove while Jesus is at prayer, after the baptism itself. This isn’t a problem, it doesn’t mean that Luke got it wrong: rather, he is setting out one of the predominant themes of his Gospel, from which our readings will be taken on Sundays over the coming year. For Luke, prayer is important, and of paramount importance in the life and ministry of Jesus: before anything important happens to Jesus, he spends time in prayer. And so it is at his baptism: it is while he is praying, in preparation for the public ministry which his baptism has begun, that the Holy Spirit descends and the epiphany, the revelation about his identity, occurs: God’s voice is heard from heaven, saying, ‘You are my Son, the Beloved; my favour rests on you.’

Thus, as in his first epiphany Jesus was revealed as a Saviour for all people and not just the people of Israel, so in his second he is revealed to humanity as God’s Son, by the voice of the Father and the presence of the Holy Spirit, the Holy Trinity bearing witness to the fullness of the divinity of Jesus, who is baptised in the fullness of his and our humanity.

But what does it mean for us? It all sounds a bit too technical and theological: why does it matter to you and me? Well, it matters for two

reasons, and S. Luke's account of Jesus' baptism seems to point to two fundamental truths about the Christian faith, and what it means to be a follower of Jesus Christ today. Firstly, by being baptised, Jesus made the waters of baptism holy, and so instituted the first Christian sacrament: that outward and visible sign of an inward and spiritual grace that makes a person a Christian. Jesus had no need of John's baptism of repentance, because he had done nothing for which he needed to repent – he was without Original Sin and committed no actual sins: rather, by being baptised, he shared even more fully in what it means to be human, to be one of us – he was not baptised to be made holy, but to make the waters of baptism holy for us, so that, as he shared in our humanity, we might come to share in his divinity, through grace. This is how S. Paul puts it in his letter to Titus: 'It was for no reason except his own compassion that he saved us, by means of the cleansing water of rebirth and by renewing us with the Holy Spirit which he has generously poured over us through Jesus Christ our Saviour. He did so that we should be justified by his grace, to become heirs looking forward to inheriting eternal life.' Baptism, the foundational sacrament of the Christian faith, not only makes us Christians, and sons and daughters of God; it sets our feet on the path to eternal life, and is also the means by which our sins are washed away and we are given grace to live our lives as Jesus lived his, in obedience to God's call.

So Baptism is the beginning of Christian discipleship, and alongside his account of Jesus' baptism S. Luke offers us another foundation: the Christian discipline without which the baptised disciple cannot live, mature and grow in the faith. Remember that it was as Jesus was praying that he was revealed as God's Son: just as baptism is the foundational sacrament, bringing us into the life of God's family, the Church, making us sons and daughters of our heavenly Father; so prayer is the foundational discipline of the Christian disciple, nourishing our relationship with God, the coals which keep the fire of faith alive, burning and bright. Without this discipline of prayer – without nourishing our souls through actively seeking to place ourselves in the presence of God, and to converse with him – the more easily our souls become arid, the more distracted we are by the cares of our busy lives, the less time and inclination we have to devote to prayer, and thus the more distant our relationship with God grows as he is pushed to the margins, we only calling upon him occasionally when we need a divine favour. As Luke's Gospel shows us, prayer is vital to the life of any Christian, just as it was for Jesus: if Jesus, who had no need of baptism because he was sinless needed to pray, how much more do we!

Prayer isn't easy: it takes time, effort and perseverance; but if we are serious about our Christian discipleship, and fulfilling our baptismal

calling, it is more than worth the effort, and we will soon find it becomes our spiritual rock and lifeline, which we cannot do without.

As this new year begins, may each of us commit ourselves afresh not only to living out our calling as those baptised into Christ's Body, forgiven and made heirs of eternal life; let us also commit ourselves afresh to our lives of prayer – to placing ourselves in the presence of God, allowing his Spirit to make our wills his own, and inspiring us to live as Jesus lived, with compassion, openness, understanding and trust.

As we read S. Luke's Gospel over the coming year, we will see just how important prayer was for Jesus, and that it was after prayer that great things happened for him. If we are serious about following him over the coming year, we must be serious about our prayers: prayer is not only important in the life of the baptised disciple of Christ, it is vital. So give it a try, persevere, and see what happens.

Amen.