

Sermon for the Baptism of Christ

Rev. James Shakespeare, Sunday 11 January 2026

Isaiah 42.1-9; Acts 10.34-43; Matthew 3.13-end

Father, at the Jordan you revealed Jesus as your Son: may we recognise Him as Lord and know ourselves – through Him - as your beloved children. Amen

Some of the most significant moments in our life are hidden. And yet it is from such as these that much enfolds in our lives. +The Baptism of Christ – like our own Baptism + its living expression in our adult lives – is one such hidden moment. A moment when God the Father revealed Himself to Jesus, by the river Jordan, in a unique + hidden way, and from which pivotal point flowed all that Jesus was to be in his mature life + ministry. As Peter put it, in Acts, “God anointed Jesus with the Holy Spirit and with power, and he went about doing good and healing all who were oppressed by the devil...”

The story may be well known to us, but for Jesus, with the crowds and John the Baptist by the riverside, it was an essentially hidden act, which was to define his life. And indeed, its consequences were to be unbelievably profound... For after Jesus consented to be baptised, *‘the heavens were opened, the Spirit of God descended like a dove; and a voice from heaven said, ‘This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased.’* And you can’t get much more of an affirmation than that! It would be a bit like the global CEO of your company, on your first day of work, coming +saying to you, *‘Hey! You’re really special. & Since you’re on board, amazing things are going to happen. Trust me!’*

Last week, I was at preaching at Trumpington + in an attempt to bring new light into this New Year, I looked at the first great Epiphany story: the coming of the magi. And we explored the idea that like the wise men, we too need to travel – to go on a journey, spiritually – if we are to meet Jesus afresh and discern his meaning for our lives.

Well, this week, we look at the 2nd great Biblical story associated with Epiphany, the Baptism of Christ. +Once again, here we have a story with a great deal to say to us about how to make the most of this new Year, and how to live authentically, with hope in our hearts: the Baptism of Christ, like our own Baptism – as I’ve already suggested – a moment of pivotal significance, for the life of faith. For it was here that Jesus realised how deeply he was loved... + here, we too, in the same way, discover the extent to which we are loved, and the promise of life, as it could be, following the God who made us and (at every moment) loves us into being.

Listen to these words about Baptism from an amazing book by the Dominican Timothy Radcliffe, called *‘Taking the Plunge’* – all about living our own Baptism fully; something which I think (for many Anglicans) is a barely discovered reality: *‘Christians make the grandest claims for baptism. It is our sharing in Christ’s victory over death, our lives hidden in the risen Christ and taken up into the very life of God... When Martin Luther felt discouraged, he would say: ‘I am baptised, and through my baptism God, who cannot lie, has bound himself in covenant with me.’*

Today, the Festival of the Baptism of Christ, is such an opportunity (a hidden liturgical moment) to meet God afresh; to step into the life of Christ; and to re-commit to living our own Baptismal life – which I will invite you to do (if you wish to), in a few moments, as I move to the font and enable us to renew our baptismal Faith + (afterwards, if you wish) to mark our foreheads with water from the font, as a sign of renewal. For here, at this point in the Church's year, we are invited to experience the freedom of rediscovering that we belong to God, that everything is in his hands, and that he loves us. +Here, we face the special opportunity of living – once more – from this living ground of faith, allowing the fragrance of the Gospel to unfold in our lives, right from where we are: whether we're near or far from God.

So what does the Baptism of Christ mean? what does our own Baptism into Christ, and its recapitulation + renewal mean? for us personally and as a living Christian community, at the start of this new year, filled with potency, hope and possibility?

Some years ago, when I was a vicar in Leicestershire, I had the privilege of attending an amazing conference in London, at Heythrop College, entitled '**The Practise of the Presence of God**', all about the life of prayer. And we had some leading speakers in the field, including no less than six professors, three monks, and an ex-archbishop of Canterbury, Rowan Williams.... But what came across really powerfully was the life and grace given, without fail, to every baptised Christian, thro' the life of faith, to grow into the very life of God: through responding to His love (for we all have free will- God never forces anyone). And we do this, by the gracious invitation of Christ, through prayer + love + inner purification, learning to see life as it really is – so often hidden from us, by our afflictive thoughts – intimately connected to God + to all that is, in Him.

It's as if God – through the life and death and resurrection of Christ – + through the grace of Baptism – has given each one of us an amazing gift and potential. Something we scarcely dare to believe, because we're so used to thinking that life is difficult & the world against us (there's no such thing as a free lunch!). For God has given each of us a beautiful pearl+ we need only to open our hearts to receive it, to allow that pearl – within the shell or oyster of our own being (however tarnished) – to grow into something beautiful.

But there is another aspect of the Baptised life that I would like to end with, as we begin to think about the year ahead, as a local Christian community. And that is the challenge of living not just from the centre – where Christ is – but of going out, from here, to love and serve the world. In other words, the challenge of practising our faith, in joyful obedience, wherever it takes us. Because our faith – if it is to be alive + not to stagnate – is a journey, and we need to keep moving, following Jesus, if we are to grow. Which is why, this year, we will be taking the theme of pilgrimage, to frame our mission at St John's...

- A Pilgrimage of prayer & discipleship
- A Pilgrimage of mission & service
- A Pilgrimage into St John's particular calling of hospitality

‘Come follow me’, Jesus says, ‘and I will show you what life is’ ... to be, through Him (to quote Isaiah 42) - ‘*a light to the nations, to open the eyes that are blind + to bring out from the prison those who sit in darkness*’

+I want to end with the vision of the late Pope Francis, articulated in a way relevant to all our Churches. A vision, enlightened with the light of Christ, of journeying out of ourselves towards the peripheries... to serve others, in Christ, inviting all to discover, with us, the great mystery of salvation – of new life in Baptism + of being called together to follow Him, into a confused, divided & wounded world, offering His gift of life in all its fullness: ‘*The Church is called to come out from itself and to go to the peripheries, not only geographical, but also existential: those of the mystery of sin, of suffering, of injustice, those of ignorance and the absence of faith, those of thought, those of every form of human misery.*’

We need, I believe, in this new year, to have the courage to live out our faith – to ‘be’ the Church – and, as the community of the baptised in this place, to both offer a welcome **and** to go out, in compassion, witness & service, into a world in so much need.

*May we, today encounter Christ afresh; and knowing how truly **we** are loved; may we journey from here, shining with the light of hope; to play our part within God’s pilgrim people, in service of His world. Amen*