

Sermon – Gen. 1. 1-5, Acts 19.1-7, Mark 1. 4-11

May I speak in the name of God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.

I want to begin this morning with what might be a rather obvious point from our Gospel reading – of all the people in the history of people that needed to be baptised, Jesus might well be the very bottom of that very long list. Indeed, John the Baptist was calling people to him, Mark tells us, for a ‘baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins’ – you confessed your sins, John dunked you, lifted you up and then hey presto, you were a new you - clean, forgiven and sparkling. This doesn’t sound like a process Jesus of all people needed to join in with. He was the one John was trying to tell everyone about – the one more powerful, more worthy, the one who will be doing the baptising, not being baptised himself. And yet, within all the crowds of these unwashed sinners, all ready and silently waiting for their turn, the one that Mark calls ‘the Son of God, the Lord’ arrives on the scene – God himself had come to join in.

Now ‘a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins’ sounds pretty much on the nose – that is, in part, what baptism is all about. There’s a lot of commitments to be made, some promises, a couple of rebukes – a splash of water, the gifting of a lovely candle, and if you were baptised young like me, a fair amount of crying. Baptism is about this turning around, so to speak – this act of repentance - a repositioning of yourself, a fresh start. This is the challenge, the gift, John was offering out to the people of Israel. Turn back to God, be repentant, and receive forgiveness. It’s the same in today’s baptism service – ‘Do you turn away from sin, I do; Do you turn to Christ as saviour, I do.’ It all sounds great, pretty straightforward. An ask and answer.

But a potential issue here – if there is one – is that treated in isolation, this act of repentance enacted in Baptism and beyond can often look like a turning towards God that you have to generate yourself, rather than something that acts as a response to who God is in the first place. It becomes something akin to a New Year's resolution (mine is doing dry January btw) – a feeling that you need to improve yourself, to meet a particular standard – become fitter, smarter, more disciplined, more 'Christian' – all of which is to say of course, more worthy of love. You see, there's a tendency I think, particularly when we consider something like repentance, to dwell mainly on what improvements and much needed changes it seemingly demands upon our lives, to see it as a searching out for God's forgiveness that is just around the corner only if we try hard enough. But surely this important, vital aspect of the Christian life should not be made in an effort to search out for God's grace and love, but in a reaction to it. A baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins is, in other words, only one half of the story. And this second part, thankfully, wonderfully, is what we receive from the rest of Mark's retelling of Jesus' baptism.

Jesus is - oddly perhaps - rather passive in all this baptising drama. He doesn't appear to speak, he doesn't appear to announce his presence, he doesn't appear to do any different from any of the others gathered around John in the hope of a new start. He is baptised like the rest of them – he *is* like the rest of them – and yet when John dunks him, and lifts him up ... all heaven breaks loose. Matthew and Luke's accounts of this moment describe heaven being neatly 'opened' – Mark tells us that the heavens were 'torn' – everything spills out - the Spirit descends, and the Father speaks – 'this is my son, the beloved, with you I am well pleased.'

Something important here to mention I think – what is common to all the baptism accounts in fact – is that this overwhelming event, miraculous and amazing as it is, happens well before Jesus actually does anything. He’s been born, he’s grown up – Luke has that interesting side story about Mary losing him in the temple – but at the moment of his baptism by John in the Jordan river, his ministry hasn’t really begun. He hasn’t even been tempted yet (that happens in the next section) – so in other words, his report card is rather empty. And yet - and yet - God the Father still declares these extraordinary words over him. God doesn’t say – ‘this is my son, the beloved...he has a great time of prayer each morning, always reads his scriptures...loves his mum and dad, does the best carpentry around.’ No. As far as the Gospel accounts tell us, Jesus’ ministry hasn’t started – nothing of Jesus’ exemplary character is brought out as evidence - and yet he is still called beloved, the one in whom the Father was well pleased.

I might be bold and say that the whole Christian gospel could in fact be summed up in this point: that what God the Father said to Jesus on that day in the Jordan river, he says over every one of his children coming up to be baptised. It is a belief echoed in a section of our own baptism liturgy, my absolute favourite part of the service – the moment when the priest makes the sign of the cross on the person's forehead and says directly to them – 'Christ claims you for his own'. Tom, Christ claims you for his own ... you can insert your own name in that sentence here. Christ claims you for his own. You are claimed and loved by God – you already belong to him, whether you've been baptised for 50 years, 5 minutes, or never before.

You could draw a parallel here with the Old Testament reading we heard this morning, with how the writers of Genesis 1 imagined God looking out at the universe, the world he's created, and before the sun even had a chance to do its thing, God already declared over it – 'the light was good.' And God goes on, throughout that opening chapter to declare the innate goodness in all that he has made – water, earth, plants, trees, the moon, the stars, living creatures of every kind, and of course, human beings – 'it was all, to him, very good.' Christ's baptism proudly re-displays a recurring truth present throughout the scriptures: that God loves that which he made, that you are beloved by him, created by him, and in you, he is well pleased.

So from the moment of Jesus' baptism, then, an overwhelming sense of belovedness was the ground of his life and the guiding force of his world-changing ministry that was to come. He gathers to himself a bunch of misfits – the disciples – and they learn too of this truth of the Father's love for them and all others. Jesus says it himself, famously, in John's Gospel – 'as the Father has loved me, so I have loved you...abide in my love, and love one another.' Later in John's Gospel, the Holy Spirit which anointed Jesus in the river Jordan is then breathed out by Jesus upon his disciples as they begin the work and ministry that becomes the Church we're still a part of today. The Church is therefore centred upon Christ – it's his body, as we like to say – the apostle Paul, from the reading from Acts we also heard earlier, he brings his fellow Christians into this community through baptising them – baptism is the formal sign that you are responding to this truth of the love of God for you, and are joining a community with a commitment to share that love for all to see. This is what the Church is then, in essence – or at least what it should be. An outworking of all this love – a love for God that responds to the truth of his love for us – and a love for one another that flows from Christ himself.

Of course, baptism is – as John provided it - a means of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. It is about a fresh start, a turning around, a choice to choose to believe in God as Lord. But through Christ, baptism is also the means of discovering our true innate identity as children of God, joining a family where we know we're loved by him and declared by him to be good. The latter is what should prompt the former – to know we're loved is to choose to turn to God and love him back, and to know we're loved is to want to demonstrate and display that love to so many others, in the hope and prayer that they learn it for themselves too. Jesus might well be the very bottom of that very long list of those needing to be baptised – but how amazing is it that he chose to join in that day. Because through it, and by it, we can come to know ourselves, and all others in this world, as truly and completely beloved by him. Amen.