

# Sunday 10 January: The Baptism of Christ

## The Baptism of Christ

**Readings: Acts 8.14-17; Luke 3.15-17, 21-22**

This last week in the political landscape we have seen a certain amount of turbulence as some in the Labour party have attempted to bring to the surface once and for all the debate about leadership. The whole of one day this week was taken up with this, and the timed responses of cabinet ministers to whether they were behind Gordon Brown were watched with glee, some responses coming later in the day than others. Some thought that it was a foolish attempt, coming in the build up to a general election. Those in the firing line, working hard to keep the agenda focused on government, on the 'what' and not on the 'who'. Confidence in those in whom we place our trust is important. Crowds can be fickle, reputations crushed and crumpled, by the media, colleagues and general opinion, in days and hours, and in the timed click of a send button.

Crowds and their hopes, fears and expectations, their concern for their livelihoods and who is to govern them, don't change. We hear at the beginning of our passage today from Luke's gospel, *of John* - in amongst the crowds, in the thick of it, calling out for change, for a new way of life. Inviting people to turn around, and in the baptism he is offering them, restore their relationship with God. A baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.

His message is sinking in, there is a sense of expectation amongst the crowd and they ask themselves whether John might be the long awaited Messiah. It would have been tempting for John to have been turned by the crowd...and consider for a moment what it might be like to step into those shoes (a Messiah's shoes).

Instead, he speaks the truth about his own identity and Christ's '*I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandal.*' He knows exactly who he is in relation to the one who is to come, and the nature of the baptism he offers compared to the one Jesus will bring.

Jesus is in the same fickle crowd.

We can be fickle. Concerned for our livelihoods, quick to judge, uncertain, changing our allegiance, searching for someone in whom to put our trust and hopes.

Finding our identity in relation to Jesus gives us that security and brings us home to ourselves. And we can only find our identity in relation to him because he himself knows his own identity as he relates to the Father. In the Epiphany moment of his baptism, that identity as 'Beloved Son of God' is affirmed and the world turns.

I've just been reading Rosemary Lain-Priestly's book *Unwrapping the Sacred*<sup>1</sup>. In it she beautifully describes, equinox moments or tipping points, times when life builds up its momentum to a crescendo and then in a moment of action or decision that we or others, or an organisation takes, everything changes, life as we know it unfolds with a new landscape. Nothing is the same again. As Jesus comes forward, one of the crowd, for his own baptism he takes up his own identity and vocation and precipitates a dynamic 'tipping point' for the world.

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<sup>1</sup> Rosemary Lain-Priestly, *Unwrapping the Sacred*, SPCK 2009, Chapter 1.

What happens in the scene of that ‘tipping point’ that we hear described in the passage, is a window into the dynamic life of God – Son, Holy Spirit and Father. This Epiphany moment of revelation, of who Jesus is, is defined by his relationship with others.

Jesus comes amongst the crowd placing himself alongside those who have identified themselves as in need of forgiveness. The one without sin, identifies himself as one of us, God with us, in relationship with us.

We’ve already seen from the first moments of his birth – born as a refugee in a humble stable, and witnessed first by shepherds, those considered to be lowly outsiders – that Jesus is come to live alongside us, whoever and wherever we are. Fully with God - he is fully with us. He is to be found in the lowly places of life, amongst the outcasts and the excluded, and the poor. At his death he will be crucified between two thieves, and here at his baptism he is to be found amongst the sinful. Although Jesus does not need the forgiveness John’s baptism offers, for our sake, and in solidarity with us, he goes through it.

He is at prayer, as so often in key moments of his story, Luke has him turned and open towards the Father. The Son, with us, turned towards the Father. The Holy Spirit comes *like* a dove, tangible in bodily form but not quite definable. Coming down upon him, the Spirit brings affirmation and reveals to him the love of the Father. Into this comes the word of God. In Luke, and in Mark unlike the version in Matthew, the words are intimate and personal; “You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.”

The Son, with us, turned towards the Father, graced by the Spirit, hearing words of blessing. An eternal dance – love speaking, heart speaking to heart, and the crowd are part of that. The people, the spirit, the voice, and the Son, none are superfluous, all are needed.

Our reading from Acts helps to affirm that. The rather odd reading, about Peter and John coming to lay hands on the people of Samaria, is not about the power that the disciples bring but rather the acknowledgement that baptism is about entering into the full life and community of God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

In the dramatic moment of his baptism, Jesus embraces his vocation as God’s Son, with all that will mean; a journey to bring in the kingdom, the costly path that will lead to the cross, through death to resurrection; the fulfilment and revelation of God’s glory. A journey to redeem us.

But *before* all this is to happen God expresses his unconditional love; the love of the Father for *who* Jesus is, not for *what* he does.

We are called through our own baptism to find our identity in that dynamic life of God. Jesus knowing himself as ‘Beloved’ opens the door for us to know that for ourselves too and affirm our faith in a merciful and loving God. It brings us in from being an isolated individual to being part of a community, gives us a vocation to share in God’s purposes for us. When God calls us and how is different for each of us. We each have our own identity in relation to him and our own part to play. But before we do any of it, and in order for us to participate, we need to know that same sense of affirmation and security that brings us home to ourselves. Know the ‘who’ that we are - our identity as beloved by God, caught up in the life of the Son, affirmed by the Spirit - before we embark on the ‘what’ of our vocation.

As we look ahead this year, to turbulence, uncertainty, work, a general election, the life and ministry of this church - to be lived and carried, celebrated, struggled and prayed over - we

can find our own place and security by reflecting on our own identity in relation to Christ. For a moment we put down all that we carry, all the titles and labels that define us, our job description, our tasks, our relationships, our 'to do' list, our blackberry or i-phone, and become aware of the life of God around us.

In that moment, the one who is the point and purpose of life, opens our ears to hear the same words for ourselves... 'You are my daughter, you are my son, my beloved, with you I am well pleased.' If we can hear this, and steal ourselves to believe it, then whatever comes at us, we won't just be part of a fickle crowd.

This Epiphany season – is a tipping point for us. The time of gazing at the manger has passed, now is the time to be part of God's message of hope, as knowing ourselves to be loved by God, we share in his life, playing our own part in his revelation to the world.