

You are my Son, the Beloved ...

... with you I am well pleased

A sermon given on the First Sunday of Epiphany - the Baptism of Christ - 212th January 2025, by the Mission Priest, the Revd Eileen Connolly, in Beverley Minster

Isaiah 43.1-7; Luke 3.15-17, 21-22

Have you made any New Year's resolutions? Are you the type of people who don't believe in that? Do you have any general hopes for the year, perhaps with regard to your family or your friends or your health or your social life? I've decided to do the 5:2 diet - starts tomorrow! What about spiritually? Do you have any goals, any desires that you want God to do or that you want to grow in? It's good at the beginning of a new year to spend a bit of time looking back over the last year, with God - thank Him for all the good things that have happened; ask forgiveness for all the wrong choices; clear the decks; learn the lessons that he wants to teach you from the year behind - and then put it to bed and look forward to what God has in store for each of us, personally and also as a community of believers in 2025.

But maybe at the start of this year, we can ask ourselves some more challenging questions - how far do we want to be followers or apprentices of Jesus? I love that word apprentice. Because an apprentice, the aim of an apprentice, is to emulate the master craftsman who he is apprenticed to. That's the aim of an apprentice. And so as followers of Jesus, how are we becoming more and more like him? How are we growing in living Christ's story in our daily lives, but also as a church?

In our passage in Luke today, the people were filled with expectation. Something new was happening as John the Baptist sprang onto the scene with great boldness and great charisma - we look for these qualities in our leaders, and yet all too often what we see as leadership qualities are really just arrogance and ego. But not with John: when questioned about who he was, he was quick to say that he wasn't the great leader, the Messiah, that they had been waiting for, and that there was one more powerful than him who was to come; his job was just to get things ready; the one who was coming would be filled with the Holy Spirit and fire, and he would give that power to the people. So the people were right to be expectant, but their hope had to be directed to the right person. And John the Baptist's ministry, short though it was, was ending - and Jesus's was just beginning, and the hinge between the two was the baptism of Jesus. Indeed after this, John the Baptist was put in prison and then beheaded by Herod.

Let's explore how Luke retells this event - he doesn't mention much about the baptism at all. He says that Jesus was baptised with all the people. I've never really noticed this before from Luke, but while people were getting baptised, Jesus lined up with them, totally anonymously - he lined up. This struck me - how Jesus lined up quietly with everyone who had been broken by the wear and tear of their selfish life, with people who had given up - all but given up - on themselves and their God. Just imagine it. When the line of downtrodden and sin-sick people formed in the hope of a new beginning through a return to God, Jesus joined them: he identified with them; he stood in solidarity with them; he acknowledged them; he was in tune with them; he who had no sin lined up with those who were sinful; he didn't join John in judging them; he didn't tell them how to live new lives; he just stood with them, walking step by step to the front

where he himself was baptised. We don't know who baptised him in Luke's gospel - it could have been John or one of his disciples.

At the beginning of this year, when we're asking challenging questions, let us ask ourselves, 'How like Jesus we are? How do we truly identify with those who are broken and sinful? How willing are we to get in line with them, to welcome them and to walk alongside them and to work with them as brothers and sisters?'

We might say that church is a hospital for the sick and broken, but do we sometimes give the message that it's only respectable, successful people that we want to build up our churches? If we ourselves are struggling, how often do we feel that we put a mask on and turn up to church? Or can we find solidarity with our brothers and sisters here and support?

Luke says nothing much about the baptism, but he notices that when all the people were baptised and when Jesus also had been baptised and was praying something amazing happened - the heaven was opened and the Holy Spirit descended upon him in bodily form like a dove. In Luke's account, the baptism happened with everyone else. It was only afterwards when Jesus was praying that he had this epiphany, this moment of great encounter and revelation. It was as Jesus was praying that he was anointed with the Holy Spirit and received the power to begin his three-year ministry. Prayer preceded any important action by Jesus and throughout his gospel, Luke shows us Jesus praying: he prays before he calls his disciples; he prays before he sets them the question, "Who do you say I am"; he prays at the time of his transfiguration; he prays before teaching his disciples how to pray; he prays on the night of his arrest; he prays at his death. For Luke, what is characteristic of Jesus will also be characteristic of the church. In Acts of the Apostles in the new church, Luke shows us the church in prayer as they wait for the promised coming of the Holy Spirit and how they continue with this practice of Jesus. So what begins with baptism is strengthened by the power of the Holy Spirit in prayer.

So I find it incredible that Jesus, who was God, found that the source of his strength and power lay beyond himself. And so must ours.

And so another challenging question as we enter a new year is, 'How much do we actually depend upon the Holy Spirit and our connection to God in prayer for the spiritual stamina we need to go into the world and make a difference in people's lives through Christ?' If this connection was vital for Jesus, it's vital for our own lives and for our lives as a community of believers if we want to see the Kingdom of God grow in Beverley and beyond. In a couple of weeks time, we've got a week of prayer coming up, and there'll be all types of prayer that we will be putting on in hourly slots and I invite you to join with us in praying, praying over the vision and the ministry of the Minister in reaching out.

So, Jesus identified with sinners in the waters. He holds on to God in prayer. And as he does this, he's filled with the Spirit, but he also is claimed as God's son because a voice came from heaven, 'You are my son, the Beloved; with you, I am well pleased.'

Before Jesus had even done a single thing for God, while he was in prayer, he was given the words of affirmation, love and encouragement. And from this secure position of knowing who he was and whose he was and receiving those words of affirmation, he was able in the power of the Spirit to carry out the will of the Father.

And so it is with us? Do we know how much we are truly loved by God? Has it sunk from a head knowledge to a heart knowledge? Do we know the gaze of the loving Father upon us? Does it

strengthen us that no matter what happens, we are secure in that? Today, hear the words of the Father speaking to you, *'You are my child. I love you, and I am so proud of you.'* In our reading from Isaiah the Prophet, we hear words of affirmation too, which we can claim, *'He who created you, who formed you in the womb... who has called you by name... do not fear... you are precious in my sight... you are honoured... I love you... you are created for my glory'* - words of affirmation that we need to hear as individuals and as a church.

When Jesus heard these words, they changed his life forever. They will do the same for our children, our neighbours, our spouses, our church members and, Jesus promised, even our enemies. Luke uses very few words to describe the baptism of Jesus, but what he does say leads us into deep wellsprings of joy in our lives as we follow the way of Jesus as a church this year: identify with all people; depend upon God in prayer for wisdom, strength, and power as we live and love like him; hear the affirmation of your God as the source of your calling and purpose in life.

Let us take a moment to respond in our hearts to the Lord.

Reading Texts

Isaiah 43.1-7

¹ But now thus says the Lord, he who created you, O Jacob, he who formed you, O Israel: Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are mine. ² When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you; when you walk through fire you shall not be burned, and the flame shall not consume you. ³ For I am the Lord your God, the Holy One of Israel, your Saviour. I give Egypt as your ransom, Ethiopia and Seba in exchange for you. ⁴ Because you are precious in my sight, and honoured, and I love you, I give people in return for you, nations in exchange for your life. ⁵ Do not fear, for I am with you; I will bring your offspring from the east, and from the west I will gather you; ⁶ I will say to the north, 'Give them up', and to the south, 'Do not withhold; bring my sons from far away and my daughters from the end of the earth- ⁷ everyone who is called by my name, whom I created for my glory, whom I formed and made.'

Luke 3:15-17, 21-22

¹⁵ As the people were filled with expectation, and all were questioning in their hearts concerning John, whether he might be the Messiah, ¹⁶ John answered all of them by saying, 'I baptize you with water; but one who is more powerful than I is coming; I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. ¹⁷ His winnowing-fork is in his hand, to clear his threshing-floor and to gather the wheat into his granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire.'

²¹ Now when all the people were baptized, and when Jesus also had been baptized and was praying, the heaven was opened, ²² and the Holy Spirit descended upon him in bodily form like a dove. And a voice came from heaven, 'You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.'