

## **Sermon for 12<sup>th</sup> January 2025, Year C, Epiphany I**

**Preached at St Serf's Shettleston**

**Isaiah 43:1-7; Luke 3:15-17,21-22**

### **Sermon**

Stories sadly abound of young families who, after bringing their tiny infants for a joyful baptism, are rarely seen again within the walls of the church. It's as if these rites of passage are seen more as precious one-day celebrations rather than the beginning of a life-long journey with God. I don't blame them at all – the fault must surely lie with those of us who teach the faith.

Ironically, on the other side of the coin, I've met many people who came to a sincere faith as adults and were saddened and frustrated to discover that they could not make any public declaration of that new faith, having already been Baptised and perhaps also Confirmed as children.

Baptism is a confusing area of Church teaching. What does God actually do for a person when they are baptised? What is the point of it? If someone asked you what baptism is for, I wonder what you might say. And whatever your answer, does it make sense of Jesus getting baptised by John?

The Church primarily understands Baptism as a sacrament using the symbol of water in which God washes away our sins. But what does that mean, and that being the case, why did Jesus feel the need to be baptised? What bad things had he done, that he needed forgiveness for? And why do we now baptise children who have not yet come to understand the difference between right and wrong?

For the earliest Christians, who believed that Jesus might come back very soon to judge the whole earth, there was every reason to hurry. Once you came to believe in Christ, you got baptised as soon as possible, so that your sins were

washed away and you became ready for heaven, which could come tomorrow. Any delay might result in missing out on your salvation.

But as time went on, and Jesus didn't immediately return, people began to expect to live an entire lifetime on earth before being judged by God after their death. Then the question became *when* might be the best time to get baptised, since you can only do it once in your life. What if you got baptised too soon, wiped your slate clean, but then sinned again? You can't be washed clean a second time.

For that reason, some left their baptism until they were near death and incapable of further transgression. But this could be a very risky move in days when death could come suddenly and early. What if you died unexpectedly, before you got around to taking the plunge?

Over time, the Church found a solution to this in the Sacrament of Reconciliation, also known as Confession and Absolution. Whether this would happen in private between an individual and their priest, or in public near the start of a Sunday church service, the purpose of Absolution is so that any additional sins committed since baptism can be forgiven on a regular basis.

This made it reasonable to baptise children as babies. Then they were already prepared for heaven if the worst should happen before they grew up, and any sins committed later in life could be confessed and forgiven.

Views around this have changed over the years. While we Anglicans do indeed baptise children very happily, we don't believe today that unbaptised people are necessarily going to a bad place when they die. Instead, we see baptism as a sign and celebration of God's Spirit active within a person. When I baptise someone, I talk about it as a sign that they are God's child, that they belong to God, and nothing can remove them from God's loving arms.

This perspective is affirmed by our Old Testament reading from Isaiah, which although initially written for the people of Israel, could easily be a blessing offered

by God to someone who is being baptised: “Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are mine. When you pass through the waters, I will be with you, and through the rivers they shall not overwhelm you... [you] whom I created for my glory, whom I formed and made.”

God’s love is confirmed for Jesus, too, after he is baptised. The Holy Spirit descends on him and a voice comes from heaven, saying, “You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.”

So, there’s more going on in baptism than a washing away of sins, otherwise Jesus wouldn’t need to bother with it. But here he is, standing in line, getting baptised by John with all the other people of the region. It looks, perhaps, like there’s also something in baptism about taking on a new identity, or perhaps of embracing our truest identity, as God’s beloved child.

Throughout the bible, passing through water has always been a critical moment of transition and transformation. When the Israelites escape with Moses from Egypt they cross through the waters of the Red Sea. On one side they were slaves. On the other they are free. The water did not so much wash them, as identify them as chosen and loved.

Jesus too may not have needed to wash away his sins, but he is still transformed by the experience of passing through the waters. Through baptism he fully embodies his God-given identity which is confirmed by the dove and the voice, and so he begins his mission.

So, here are two things going on in baptism: receiving our truest identity – which is why naming is so important in our baptism liturgy – and being invited to share in the mission of God to grow God’s family and kingdom in the world.

But there’s also a third thing happening in Jesus’s baptism. I think he’s declaring himself to be one of his community, that he’s humble enough to be baptised just as they are, obedient to God the Father. The divine Son of God goes through

the water just as we all do, in solidarity with us. I'm sure we'd understand it if just once, Jesus was a bit 'holier-than-thou' and said that actually he's got it all together and doesn't really need the religious crutch that's provided for the rest of us. But no, Jesus shows the Church that we're all in it together, no matter how good or bad we think we are.

This community thing is vital to our faith. No one, not even Jesus, is a Christian on their own, but only as part of a community. Jesus's first act in ministry is, after all, to draw a community around him – his disciples – to travel and learn together, and his first miracle takes place in that most community-oriented of celebrations, a wedding.

The Holy Trinity, also, is a community of trust and love. In his baptism, the Holy Spirit alights on Jesus, the Father affirms him as his Son, and there is, I am sure, an enormous queue of people, before and long after him, who are called to share in his identity, mission and community. And that, of course, includes us, to whom God continues to say, "Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are mine."