

## **Sermon for 11<sup>th</sup> January 2026, Year A, Epiphany I**

**Preached at St Serf's Shettleston**

**Isaiah 42:1-9; Acts 10:34-43; Matthew 3:13-end**

### **Sermon**

I've always felt that Baptism is a very confusing area of Church teaching. Over the centuries Churches have disagreed and even completely split from each other over the purpose and practice of Baptism. Is it something that only adults can do, or is there a good reason to baptise children? What is actually happening in Baptism? Is it a sign of membership in a Church? A naming and blessing ceremony for a newborn child? Or does it have some spiritual impact, such as cleaning our sins away, or infusing us with God's Holy Spirit?

One thing that all Churches agree on, as far as I'm aware, is that a person can only be baptised once in their life – though they will happily call baptisms performed by some other Churches invalid, which is how I came to be Baptised twice – once as an infant in the Church of England, and once as a young adult by the Baptists – and I'm sure I'm not the only one here to have been done more than once!

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

This Sunday, therefore, as we celebrate the Baptism of our Lord by John at the river Jordan, we are offered an opportunity to think through some of these issues in the light of Jesus' own experience.

And so, my first question is this: what is really happening in Baptism?

Immediately we walk into a quagmire of conflicting ideas. People were coming to John to be baptised and as part of that they were confessing their sins. Baptism has always been considered to wash away sins, the stain of all the bad and selfish things we did before we accepted God's invitation to live differently.

But most early Christians came to believe that baptism was a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to be freed from those sins that would keep us from heaven. In Christian Baptism, your slate was wiped clean, your score reset to zero, but if you sinned again, what more could be done for you? For that reason, some left their baptism until they were on their deathbed and incapable of further transgression. A very risky move I'm sure you'll agree, especially in Roman days when death could come suddenly and early.

As you can imagine, Baptism had a different meaning for those who believed Jesus might come back very soon indeed, compared to those who had come to realise that they might live their entire lives without seeing him return. What once seemed like a simple choice – you believed in Christ, you got baptised, your sins were washed away, you became ready for heaven, which would be any day now – this now became more complex. When should I get baptised? What's the benefit of doing it sooner rather than later if it's a one-time deal? What can I do to save myself if I sin after I've been baptised? Maybe, I should get my sinning in now and leave the free gift of baptism to fix the mess later? As St Augustine said, "Lord, make me pure, but not yet." The Church later added the sacrament of Confession and Absolution to allow for repeated forgiveness of sins without needing additional baptisms, and we still do that in every Sunday service.

And what of children? Is it reasonable to baptise them immediately so that if they die as infants (as many did), they would reach heaven? Or did they need to make their own choice later, as adults? What if they died in the meantime? And at what age precisely did they become spiritually liable for their own actions?

Views on these issues have changed over the years, as cultural norms have shifted. For example, where once the man of the house would have made the decision for the whole household – wife, children, servants and slaves included – later generations prioritised individual adult choice.

Returning to Jesus' own baptism, John himself sees another problem – or at least Matthew does, since he's recording this – because John tries to refuse Jesus' baptism, suggesting that their roles should be reversed. Why would Jesus need to be baptised after all, since he was without sin?

Jesus, however, insists, arguing that it is proper to fulfil all righteousness. But what on earth does he mean by *that*? Is he just doing it for appearances' sake? It seems unlikely. Jesus isn't really someone who goes through with religious ceremony just for the sake of appearances – quite the opposite – he tends to oppose any empty ritual.

And anyway, after Jesus emerges from the water, we hear that the Spirit of God alights on him like a dove, and the voice of his Father declares that 'This is my Son, the beloved, with whom I am well-pleased.' Something important has definitely happened. This is not going through the motions just for show.

So, it looks like there's more to baptism than a washing away of sins; there's also something about taking on a new identity. In the Bible, whenever anyone passes through water, it's 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. And when they arrive at the Promised Land and cross the Jordan with Joshua, a similar transition occurs, and they are no longer wanderers but settlers.

Even though Jesus doesn't need to wash away *his* sins – and Matthew is very clear about that – he is still transformed by the experience. Through baptism he

begins to fully embody his God-given identity which is confirmed by the dove and the voice, and he begins his mission.

‘Identity and Mission,’ or to put it another way, ‘Being and Doing,’ are the two main pillars of our faith. Who we believe we are directs what we desire to do, and what we do influences who we believe we are. If you truly know yourself to be a beloved child of God, you will act accordingly to show that love; you won’t be able to help it. And those who work together tirelessly out of love and charity, begin to form a community with a particular identity and self-understanding. ‘We are this kind of people because we do these kinds of things.’

So, in his baptism, Jesus is embracing his true identity, and he’s beginning the mission his Father has given him, but there’s also a third thing he’s doing – he’s declaring himself to be a humble member of his community, obedient to God the Father. The divine Son of God goes under the water just as we do, in solidarity with us.

I believe this community thing is vital to our faith. Who is it who has an identity and a mission? In the Bible it’s almost never an individual, but a community. Even Jesus, in his baptism, is clearly not going through this alone. His first act in ministry is after all to draw a community around himself – the disciples – to journey, study, and serve together.

Even the Holy Trinity is also a community. The Holy Spirit alights on Jesus. The Father affirms him, and there is, I am sure, an enormous queue of people, before and long after him, who are called to share identity, mission and community with him. And that, of course, includes us, who desire so much to share in the life and love of Christ.