

Sunday 12 January 2025
First Sunday of Epiphany
The Baptism of Christ

Liverpool Parish Church

OT: Isaiah 43: 1-7

NT: Acts 8: 14-17

Gp: Luke 3: 15-17; 21-22

For each of us, there come turning points in our life. Days after which, nothing will ever be the same. Perhaps it was the day you started in your first job, or when you were promoted to a post of responsibility. It may have been the day you discovered a particular genre of music, art or literature or the fateful day you went to your first football match. Maybe it was the day you first met your best friend, or your life-partner, the day you first realised that you were in love.

Great or small in their importance, these turning points had a long-term significance in your life, which you may have only half-realised at the time.

Jesus, too, had turning points in his life. The first came as we heard last week when he was 12 years old, he went up to Jerusalem with his parents for the first time and debated God's law with the experts. When his parents found him in the Temple, he explained himself in words which, literally translated, mean, *'Didn't you know I have to be about the things belonging to my father?'* This is often translated as *'in my father's house'*, but 12 was the age when boys went to work in the family business, so it could mean, *'I must start working for God, my heavenly Father'*. Either way, it was a turning point. He realised, probably for the first time, that his relationship with God was like that of father and son. Gradually he developed a deeper understanding of the special and unique relationship role he was to play in God's plans.

However, until he was nearly 30, Jesus got on with the family business of carpentry. Then his cousin John started baptising the crowds in the River Jordan, proclaiming that the Kingdom of God was about to begin. Now Jesus realised that his hour had come.

He was baptised, and as he came up from the water, he heard his Father's voice, exclaiming, *"You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased."* These words were quoted from two different places in the Old Testament. *"You are my Son"* was from Psalm 2 and was spoken by God to the new King. So, Jesus realised he was called to be the Messiah. But *'in you I am well pleased'* comes from Isaiah 42, in what are called the Servant Songs. These poems climax in Isaiah 53, when it's made abundantly clear that anyone who serves God will have to suffer for it. So the track of Jesus's life was mapped out for him at this moment: he was to be not just the Messiah, but the crucified Saviour.

For each of us, similar moments happen in our lives, and there's no going back. We have been heading for some goal, and we realise it's more important to take another direction

altogether. Sometimes the life-changing experience comes like a bolt from the blue, and in a moment of deep emotion we give our lives to God. More often we work up to it gradually, until one day we wake up and realise that we are not the same person that we were six months ago.

For every Christian, there comes a turning point when we realise that obeying God is more important than anything else. As was the case with Jesus, there may be a long gap between the day we commit ourselves, and the time when we realise what self-denial and suffering that may involve. But when the turning points come in your life, you will recognise them for what they are. And you will know, deep within yourself, that you can't ignore them - when God calls, you have to do what he asks you to. But, like Jesus again, with the call comes the gift of God's power, giving you the strength to do everything you have to.

The first three Gospels all have the story of Jesus' baptism by John in very similar words. John's version of events, as so often, is slightly different - you might like to go and have a look at it in John 1.29-34. But all four Gospels agree that this is a moment of confirmation, when God declares his love for Jesus. What is so moving is that this is before the start of Jesus' full ministry. He has yet to embark upon the painful and costly path that will lead to the cross. The love of the Father is not just because of what the Son does, but because of who he is. The hectic, exhilarating and terrifying ministry of Jesus is set in motion by this affirmation: *"You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased"* (Luke 3.22). It is because Jesus is loved that he is obedient.

This passage in Luke also continues the story of John the Baptist. Here he is, at the height of his powers, with the crowd hanging on his every word. They have no interest in Jesus, yet. He is just one of the many coming for baptism. Their whole attention is fixed on John. *'Who is he?'* they ask. *'Surely he must be the chosen one of God?'* It is a symptom of the drivenness of John's calling that he is not distracted by the flattering and tempting voices all around him. He knows what he has to do, and he knows his limits.

But what of John's assessment of the ministry of the One who is to come? John's preaching has been fiery and full of anger. He has preached repentance with a ferocity that has obviously got through everyone's defensive barriers. He is sure that the Messiah will confirm everything he has said, and add to it. He waits for the Messiah to bring devastating judgement. He may be prepared to submit his own ministry to that of the Messiah, but is he prepared to have his clear message of hellfire and destruction reinterpreted? Later stories of John the Baptist suggest that he did learn that Jesus' message was not his and accepted that, but that is not to suggest that judgment is absent from Jesus' preaching. On the contrary, it is a sombre and continuous note. People's reaction to Jesus is their reaction to God, and since to hate God is to hate life, people choose their own judgement as they react to God's beloved Son.

But John's preaching is a sub-plot in today's readings. You have to remember it, because it will come back later in the story. But for the moment, the emphasis is somewhere else. It is based on the loving interaction of the Trinity.

In the Gospel reading, the love of the Father for the Son is made visible by the Holy Spirit, descending like a dove, "*descending in bodily form*", verse 22 says. What the Son does for us, which is to make God's love incarnate, the Holy Spirit does for the earthly Jesus. The Holy Spirit gives Jesus the confirmation that he is, indeed, the beloved Son of the Father. Is it heretical to think that Jesus might need such a confirmation as he embarks upon his mission, or is it yet another part of his saving identification with us?

Acts gives us a further elaboration of the way in which a relational, Trinitarian God works. This is actually a very odd little passage. It is easy to get distracted by the intriguing question of what was missing when the good people of Samaria were baptised only in the name of Jesus. What dramatic gifting did Peter and John convey with their prayers and their laying on of hands?

But the 'magic' is a fatal distraction, as the verses immediately after today's set reading make clear. The point of it is that Jesus' ministry is not about himself: it is about the Father who has sent him, and the Holy Spirit who keeps the love of the Father an ever-present reality. Christian baptism is baptism into the loving community of God.

This, then, is what we are called to: to hear God say to us, as to Jesus, that he loves us and is pleased with us. The resounding joy of today's reading from Isaiah is what we are promised in Jesus' baptism, as he takes up his mission for us. We are created by God, Isaiah says, for his glory, and that is why he chooses to redeem us. Not because we are worthy but because, inexplicably, he loves us. Just as Jesus is named '*beloved*' by God, we, too, are invited to live in the security of being beloved children of God. This identity is not something we earn; it's freely given, calling us to live out of love rather than fear or striving.

Our identity calls us to love others as God loves us, bringing peace, compassion, and acceptance to the world. John's humility highlights a new kind of Messiah: one who serves, forgives, and lifts others up. Jesus' baptism marks Him as a Saviour who walks with humanity, meeting us where we are with gentleness and grace.

The baptism of the Spirit represents God's refining work in our lives, giving us strength to live out our faith. Jesus' baptism shows us that receiving God's Spirit calls us to purpose, empowering us to bring love, justice, and peace to the world. We remember that the Spirit empowers us to be agents of change in our communities, bringing hope and healing to others.

The moment of baptism reveals that God is not distant but fully present, inviting each of us into a close, personal relationship. Just as God names Jesus, each of us is also called by name, affirming our worth and purpose. And as we look forward into 2025, we need to listen to God's voice in our own lives, finding reassurance in God's closeness and care, and then find ways to share this sense of belonging with others, particularly those who may feel forgotten or undervalued?

Fr Bill Addy