

God is always there

A sermon prepared by The Revd Dr William Whyte for St Peter's online service 10 January 2021

Ref: Mark 1: 4-11

Today we commemorate and celebrate the Baptism of Christ: an event saturated in symbolism, rich in meaning, and somewhat overwhelming as a result.

The Baptism of Christ represents a beginning and end. It's the beginning of Jesus' ministry, the moment he is anointed and appointed to preach and teach and be publicly proclaimed as the Messiah. It's also, by the same token, the end – indeed, the fulfilment – of John the Baptist's ministry. He has proclaimed the coming King, the Messiah who will follow him. Now that King, that Messiah, is here – and so John's work is done.

More than this, though, the Baptism of Christ is a major theological moment: a sacrament that, like all sacraments, both illustrates and affects something momentous. In fact, the Baptism of Christ is hugely important because it encapsulates something fundamental about the two key doctrines of the Christian faith – something about the nature of Christ and something about the nature of God.

The fundamental truth about Jesus's very nature that it makes manifest is this: that Jesus is both God and man. Our Old Testament reading reminds us that God created everything: the water, the earth, and humans themselves. It's a truth beautifully captured in our Psalm. And yet, in the Baptism of Christ, here is God baptized by one of his creations, with one of his creations, on one of his creations, in the form of one of his creations.

But that isn't all. The Baptism of Christ illuminates a still more wonderful mystery: the mystery of the Trinity. In this moment, God the Son is recognized, God the Spirit appears as a dove, and God the Father speaks, saying, "You are my Son, the Beloved, with you I am well pleased."

So here we have the Incarnation, the Trinity, the beginning of Jesus' ministry, and the end of John the Baptist's. And that's not it. If we push further, there's more – so much more. There's a lot going on. Too much in many respects.

It's an overwhelming text at an overwhelming time. For it is a time in which too much is going on. There's just too much news. In the last week – just the last week! – we have experienced Brexit, the worsening COVID situation, another lockdown, riots in Washington DC, human rights abuses in Hong Kong, and so much more besides. The news is full of things.

More than this, we have our own personal news – and our lives are full, too full, in that respect too. There are worries about our family, fears about our friends; for some sickness, for others hopelessness. There is too much work for some, not enough for others.

Like our Gospel, there's a sense that whether at home or abroad, in our private lives or public affairs, there's just too much to process.

That, I think, is precisely why today's reading is so helpful. Because, in addition to everything else, it tells us something about how God speaks to us all in many different ways and with many different messages.

To Jesus, the Baptism spoke to say "Begin". To John, God said, "Your work is nearing an end." Some saw in the Baptism something simple. Others saw something miraculous. Some understand it as high theology. Others look instead to the simple human truth that they share in Baptism, something Jesus himself experienced. All of these messages are right. None of them is wrong. They are all from God.

One of the terrible mistakes that people throughout history have made is to think that God has a single message for us – or to think that God communicates in only one way. Rather, as our reading shows, God will find us and meet us and give us what we need, whether that's deep theology or simple consolation, whether that's a good example of a profound mystery on which to ponder.

At the moment, some of us are in the wilderness with John the Baptist – and God may be saying to you, stay and rest, now is not the time for action. Others are sharing Jesus' call to start something new, to reach out to others. Some of us will find the story of the Baptism an encouragement to recall their own experiences; others may want to ponder the deep theological meanings of the moment.

It doesn't matter which of these you are – or even if your understanding, your experience of this text takes you somewhere else entirely. What it tells is that God is always there – in old and new, in the simple and the complex, in the profound and in the everyday. God is speaking to us always, if we will but listen.

God is here, he is with us – he is with you now. Amen.