

## Baptism

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Eternal Father,  
who at the baptism of Jesus  
revealed him to be your Son,  
anointing him with your Holy Spirit:  
grant to us, who are born again by water and the Spirit  
that we may be faithful to our calling as your adopted children.

My text may be found in Matthew 3 verse 13: 'Then Jesus came from Galilee to John at the Jordan to be baptized by him.'

Last Sunday, we marked Epiphany and the Sundays in January running up to Candlemas on 30<sup>th</sup> are all in the Liturgical season of Epiphany. As I said last week, 'epiphany' literally means 'made manifest' – 'revealed' – and that is the theme, 'God made manifest', which we runs through the five Sundays this January.

Traditionally, the First Sunday in Epiphany marks the Baptism of Christ. It is a moment at the beginning of the public ministry of Jesus in which God the Son is acknowledged by God the Father with the anointing of God the Holy Spirit who in the form of a dove is seen alighting on Jesus' head and by a voice from heaven heard saying, 'This is my Son, the beloved, with whom I am well pleased.' Anyone familiar with the Suffering Servant passages in the prophet Isaiah will doubtless hear an echo of the opening verses of Isaiah42:

'Here is my servant, whom I uphold  
my chosen in whom my soul delights  
I have put my spirit upon him'.

John is curiously reluctant to baptize Jesus. In John's mind, there is no need for Jesus to be baptised. In Jesus' mind, he is certain that it is the right thing to do. The difference of opinion is simply this: John feels that since Jesus is the Messiah there is no need for him to repentant his past failings and to be ritually purified to prepare himself for a new beginning; Jesus considers it right and proper 'to fulfil all righteousness'. 'Righteousness' might be interpreted as living the good life informed by what God requires of us. For Jesus, baptism is a necessary rite of passage for others to follow and it is right that Jesus should set an example.

On Boxing Day, the feast of St Stephen, little Victoria Carswell, the granddaughter of Elaine and John Dunstan, was baptized here in church. All of us who worship in this place have been baptised. It is the mark of being a Christian. This morning, I should therefore like to take a few minutes briefly to consider what baptism means to us as Christians.

The distinguishing mark of being Jewish is circumcision. The rite of passage is part of the naming ceremony for a baby boy when he is eight days old. Christians have substituted baptism for circumcision as the naming ceremony but just as the fact of circumcision is a test of whether a boy is Jewish or not, so too has our baptism become an outward sign of our inner state of being a Christian.

The Church practises a variety of forms of baptism but part of our mutual respect for each other is an acceptance that all baptism is valid regardless of who is doing the baptism. The details of the ceremony may vary: at what age - child or adult; by sprinkling water on the head or by total immersion. But whatever the way the ceremony is carried out, baptism is a rite of passage marking the beginning of the Christian life as a professed believer.

Now there is a real debate about whether you should wait to be baptized until you are in a position to make that decision for yourself. That is often called 'Believers baptism' and some in the Anglican Church favour that position. But as Anglicans, our mainstream tradition is to baptize babies, children, so that they may be brought up within the Family of God from the start. The promises are made on their behalf by their God Parents and ultimately, they will make that profession of faith for themselves when they come in due course to confirmation.

The Christian life is often pictured as a journey and on that road we are shaped as Christians as our faith being tested and refined in real situations. Journeys have a beginning and an end, a starting point and a destination. Our destination is heaven; our starting point is the process of coming to faith. Whether we are baptised first and come to faith afterwards, all Christians should be baptized as a mark of faith, as a public statement of our belief in Jesus Christ as Lord.

Baptism is one of the sacraments of the Church. It is, as I said, an outward sign of an inner reality. By the ceremony of baptism, we are saying that the grace of God through the presence of his Holy Spirit is working in and through our lives and

that we profess the faith to which we subscribe. As such, baptism can and ought to be a powerful witness to what we hold to be true and important in this life and in the life of the world to come.

So today, on the First Sunday of Epiphany when we remember the Baptism of Christ, we can celebrate two facts. Firstly, that God has manifested himself in the baptism of Jesus Christ his Son our Lord. Secondly, that we can manifest our belief in that same God through the sacrament of our baptism and by how we live our Christian lives thereafter.

May the fact of our baptism continue to encourage and sustain us on our Christian journey.

I have spoken in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit,  
Amen.

*Preached at the Eucharist*

*St Bartholomew's Dinard*

*9<sup>th</sup> January, 2011*

H: Sermon 23: Baptism

