

The Baptism of our Lord (Epiphany 1) Luke 3:15-22

This morning we celebrate Jesus Baptism but as we consider the readings, we can see that the baptism rite we use in our churches today is based not only on Jesus' experience, but on the wider scripture which underpinned it. There is comfort for us as we look back throughout God's relationship with humanity and see that in our baptism we have joined this ageless and endless story through relationship with God.

The first reading, from the prophecy of Isaiah, speaks of God calling Israel by name. I have called you by name, you are mine, it says. The giving of a name in our baptism rite is a fundamental part of the service, even though the person being baptised has been using that name up to this point in their lives, and that might be a few months, a few years or a few decades – baptism is open to all at whatever age, the speaking of the person's name as part of the service is a recognition that God calls us each by name. We echo this in the confirmation rite when the Bishop reminds candidate that they have been called by name.

And then there is the portion of the Acts of the Apostles that we just heard, that the apostles, Peter and John went to visit the church in Samaria. You remember the Samaritans, those enemies of the Jews, the polluted bloodlines of the Jewish faith, those who had not held fast to the teachings of the Jewish Pharisees and priests? Amongst those same Samaritans, the word of God through Jesus was accepted and immediately so were those people.

Once again echoing the baptism covenant of acceptance of God and by God. But also, in this account is that additional gift which we call upon at baptism, the receiving of the Holy Spirit. Now it is our belief that the Holy Spirit is received at baptism but it is fair to say that for those baptised as infants or children, most don't remember that experience. Our confirmation rite allows for an additional opportunity for the laying on of hands and public commitment to faith – just like the church in Samaria experienced. But the indwelling of the Holy Spirit is not something that just happens once or twice, or when people are watching, or in the presence of clergy or church members. The indwelling of the Holy Spirit is part of our lived experience of faith. That said, it is important for many of us at some time or another to partake in these rites and rituals that link us tangibly to our faith experience. That is what Jesus experienced, and we experience it too – even if for some of us the experience is less dramatic on the surface!

And then we come to the gospel reading, which is all about baptism, no mistaking it, we are told that John was baptising with water, just like we do, he was using the river Jordan, not quite like us in most cases where we use our font, but the principle is the same. What was different here, though, was that John was baptising Jews, sons and daughters of Israel, the chosen people of God, chosen at birth by family ties, following the law and thus inheritors of God's promise. They had nothing to fear, nothing to prove, no need of baptism, not looking for initiation into a new religious community, yet they were choosing it for themselves because John the Baptist preached a gospel of repentance and the need for the washing away of sin.

Just like our practice of baptising in infancy sees our children, after a request from their parents, adopted as daughters and sons of God and requiring nothing further to be made members of the kingdom, yet, at a time of maturity of our own choosing, after preparation and consultation, we encourage them to renew those baptismal promises and make the covenant with their own voice and feel God's promise to them at an age of recognition and understanding.

But what of Jesus' baptism? He who was without sin, God's chosen messiah, his own son, what are we to make of his submission to, and even insistence on being baptised by John? It is a clear indication that Jesus approved of John and wanted to publicly acknowledge that he

was indeed the voice crying in the wilderness make straight the way of the Lord. It also seems to be a commendation of baptism as a way of initiating oneself into the spiritual life.

At the end of Matthew's gospel is the great commission from Jesus to go and baptise all nations, Jesus was saying this is a good thing to do. But it was also a very public covenant between Jesus and God, a commitment forged between the 3 persons of the trinity, there was a first glimpse of it, Jesus rising from the water, the Holy Spirit descending like a dove and the voice of God calling Jesus God's own. Here Jesus made his commitment to begin his ministry, but God made a commitment that this was the Christ. Jesus was not going it alone, a lone human figure preaching, teaching and healing in God's name but under his own steam. At his baptism Jesus' covenant with God, indeed his place in the trinity which is God, was made clear.

Celebrating Jesus' baptism might make us think of our own baptism, perhaps you were baptised at an age where you can remember it but it's more likely you were too young to remember it first hand, but you might have been told of it. You will most likely know your god parents and the church where it took place, and perhaps this is a chance to reminisce about your baptism. Perhaps you will also recognise the echoes of confirmation in these readings and you will be more likely to think back to your own, who was your bishop, where did it occur, how old were you, were you really ready?

But what we each of us need to be reminded of is the commitment we have made, by baptism, or confirmation or both. We need to think of our responsibility as a Christian and our relationship with God but we do it reassured that it is a covenant relationship that is unequal only in so far as God gives us so much more than we can ever give God. Not only did we choose God in this journey, but God also chose us – by name. We are not asked by God to commit ourselves as slaves, beholden to God's power and might, rather we are asked to commit ourselves as children, to love and be loved by our heavenly father and to do God's will only because God's will for us is always what is best for us. And in our committed lives we receive God's unending commitment to us, something it is impossible to earn, something we rarely, if ever, deserve, and yet something that by grace is given freely to any who accept it.