

*Rev'd Maggie Rode Sunday 11<sup>th</sup> January 2015 Genesis 1: 1-5; Acts 19: 1-7; Mark 1: 4-11*

## The Baptism of Christ

Most of you know that we have 6 grandchildren and one of the most wonderful things we have been able to do as priests was to baptise our youngest grandchild, Beth, some 5 years ago.

Of our other grandchildren, Fin is the most deep thinking and he came out with a wonderfully profound question afterwards - "Why did you and Grandad wash Beth's face when it was perfectly clean already?" I will come back to the answer to that question shortly, but before that I'd like to address the question of why Jesus was baptised.

Why did the Son of God need to be baptised? Baptism is a washing away of sin, so why did the sinless Son of God need to be washed? Baptism was one of the ceremonies that was carried out when a non Jew wished to convert and become a Jew. They had to have all their pagan sins washed away. But John said to all his fellow Jews - "Don't be so arrogant! Nobody can claim membership of God's people as a birthright - we all have to repent, be washed clean and turn back to God." So the sinless Jesus was identifying with all of us sinners and the road we have to travel. It was also a necessary link and acknowledgement by Jesus of John's preparatory role in his ministry.

At his baptism I would think that Jesus, like the crowds was filled with anticipation and expectation. We hear very little in the Gospels of Jesus early life. In fact liturgically, we have moved on 30 years from the visiting of the Magi which we celebrated on Tuesday. His Baptism marks the beginning of His ministry and Jesus himself sees it as the starting point. He was marking a

change in direction from which there could be no going back. Jesus was signalling he was fully ready to follow God's call and God's claim upon his life.

Jesus is baptised and Mark tells the story in quite solemn language echoing the Old Testament - "This is how it happened; he saw the heavens open" If we go back to the biblical roots we will realise that seeing the heavens open does not mean a trapdoor opening in the sky, but rather God's dimension behind ordinary reality. It's as though an invisible curtain is pulled back right in front of us and we are standing in the presence of a quite different reality.

Mark tells us that the heavens have been rent asunder and the Spirit of God has descended on Jesus. As the theologian Morna Hooker puts it "The barrier dividing God and man has been torn aside .....for the Messiah has been anointed with God's own Spirit and God speaks to him directly"

"You are my son, the Beloved." These six simple words from the gospel message speak volumes What stands out when you hear God's words to Jesus is that God is already pleased with Him. Jesus is at the start of his ministry - he is about to do many wonderful things, but He hasn't yet begun. They state something that is already true - that Jesus is already God's beloved.

So how does this relate to our Baptism - why do we wash people's faces when they are perfectly clean already?

Nigel talked last week to you about grace and the acceptance of grace. Baptism is a means of grace which works in us to quicken and strengthen and comfort our faith in Christ and it seals our union with Him. It gives us communion with him and with one another .It is one of the means by which we confess Christ as our Lord and are visibly distinguished from the rest of the world.

In Baptism the routine and practical meets the mysterious and mystical. Here is a place where the ordinary becomes extraordinary. It is where we 'do things' with ordinary things like water and oil and use quite extraordinary language to speak of what God himself is doing there.

As long as Churches have existed there has been discussion as to whether infants and children should be baptised or whether they should wait until they are old enough to make the decision and be baptised at their own request. But surely, baptism is primarily a symbol of what God is doing for us, not what we are doing for God. Baptism is an outward symbol of God's grace working in us. He is working in us and calling us into a relationship with Him. When we are ready to accept God's grace on our own, we declare that with our own voice at Confirmation, which is a public acceptance of the grace that has been at work within us.

And this question of washing that Fin asked has been around from the second century when the Church Father Tertullian stated " that a man is sprinkled with water and is not at all the cleaner, but then has the consequent attainment of eternity, is esteemed the more incredible"

Martin Luther describes the moment of baptism as "our ordination into the priesthood of all believers". We are baptised...immersed in God's love and changed by his Spirit. We are created so that we may each of us hear and respond to God's word of love for us. We recognise this as we look at Jesus, the love expressed in human form, and we are enabled to live in love through the creative power of the Holy Spirit, who hovered over the waters of our Baptism. It is the Holy Spirit who stirs us and empowers us to live out our true calling, as God's beloved children, with whom he is well pleased. Amen