

## The Baptism of Our Lord 12 January 2020

### Let Your Light So Shine [A Sermon Preached by the Rev'd Jill Renison]

[Mt 3.13-17]

We are now in Epiphanytide, when we continue the joyful celebrations that began at Christmas. Last week we heard the story of wise men from the east, who were almost certainly not Jewish, which explains the Church's understanding of the feast as the manifestation of Christ to the Gentiles. This week the lectionary gives us Matthew's account of the baptism of Christ in the River Jordan by John, next week is the account of that baptism in John's Gospel. We then move into the call of the first disciples and the beginning of Jesus' public ministry. The season concludes on February 2, the Presentation of Christ in the Temple, or Candlemas to give it its traditional name. The child who has been manifested to the magi at his birth is now recognised by Simeon and Anna, when he comes to be presented in the Temple according to the Law of Israel. He is both 'a light to lighten the Gentiles' and 'the glory of God's people Israel'.

From this brief overview you can see that the season has a definite theme to it. There is a strong sense of mission and call running throughout it. At the same time there is joy and rejoicing, for the light of the world has come amongst us, the light that has been foretold by the prophets and long awaited by the people of Israel. This is why we have white or gold vestments and frontals, for they are the colours of joy and gladness.

Turning now to Matthew's account of Jesus' baptism, we are immediately faced with a problem. If John the Baptist proclaims the necessity of baptism, saying, '*repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near*', then why does Jesus seek baptism when he is the sinless one, he has nothing to repent about? Jesus himself explains this by saying that, '*it is proper for us in this way to fulfil all righteousness*'. What does he mean by this?

Matthew's Gospel is the most Jewish of the four gospels and scholars believe he was writing for a primarily Jewish audience. He is intent on showing that Jesus' birth has been long foretold in the Hebrew Scriptures and that his coming is part of God's great plan. In fulfilling all righteousness, Jesus is realising scriptural hopes, he is being obedient to God's will. To quote Dorothy Lee:

Jesus does not need to be baptised, but his coming is precisely to identify with sinful humanity in need of repentance. He lives as one of us, prepared to do what we need to do, prepared to live as we should live.<sup>1</sup>

---

1 p. 16 Dorothy Lee: *A Friendly Guide to Matthew's Gospel*.

Here we are reminded very clearly what the Incarnation means; in Jesus, God comes alongside us, in humility and solidarity, even to the point of joining us in repentance and renewal. As Christians, we are called to live humble, unpretentious lives of repentance. Jesus stands together with us in solidarity, humility and love. This is what true righteousness is, not the self-righteousness involved in judging others but coming alongside our neighbours for the sake of our common life together.<sup>2</sup> Righteousness means doing what God wants, even to the point of Jesus' willing submission to suffering and death as the faithful Servant of his Father, sent to redeem the world.

As Jesus emerges from the waters of baptism, he has an epiphany, a manifestation of God. The Holy Spirit descends in the form of a dove and a voice from heaven is heard, clearly proclaiming Jesus as God's Son. In Matthew's Gospel, the heavenly voice is far more public than Mark or Luke have it. Jesus has been empowered by the Spirit to carry out the mission and ministry of the Servant long foretold. This will lead to a renewal so profound that it is a new creation. Just as the Spirit in the form of a dove hovered over the waters in the creation story in Genesis, so the Spirit hovers over Jesus in a divine affirmation of Jesus as the Son of God and the initiator of a new creation.<sup>3</sup>

Baptism also means calling, our calling as daughters and sons of God. In baptism we are called to follow Jesus and to share in his way of life. This is not a life of presumption and arrogance, but a life of humility and service in solidarity with others. We are called to tread a path of unassuming generosity, always embracing the Spirit's sanctifying, restring, empowering renewal. We ourselves are beloved sons and daughters of God; so too is everyone we meet.

Shortly I will bless the water in the font and invite you all to sign yourselves with that water as a symbol of your re-commitment to your baptism. We are part of the Body of Christ, so just as Jesus heard God's words, '*This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased*', so we too should hear those words as addressed to us. God's love for us is very real but for many of us it helps to have that love reaffirmed, by sign and symbol. As you trace the sign of the cross in water on your forehead, remember that through this God is saying to you, you are my son, my daughter, the beloved, in whom I am well pleased.

In the old Book of Common Prayer, just after the sermon and before the collection, we say, '*Let your light so shine before (men) that they may see your good works and glorify your father which is in heaven*'.

In our baptism we became children of God;

may we be so emboldened by it,

that our lights may shine forth to the glory of the God who loves us.

---

<sup>2</sup> SALT blog for Baptism OLJC.

<sup>3</sup> p. 40, Brendan Byrne, *Lifting the Burden*.