

Sermon for online 'Oakworth Parish Churches' YouTube channel.
Christ Church Oakworth. St. John's Newsholme
Epiphany, 10th January 2021 by Sharon
Readings: Acts 19:1-7
Mark 1:4-11 The baptism of Jesus

Knowing

What is your very earliest memory of attending a baptism, or as many call it, a Christening?

It probably wasn't your own if you were Christened as a baby but for many it could be your own if you were christened at an age to decide for yourself? Maybe you never have been Christened or attended one.

My first memory of attending a Christening was for my baby cousin, invited not only to share it alongside other family and friends, I was invited to be my cousin's godparent.

At the time of being asked I had no belief whatsoever in God, certainly did not have any understanding of what the Holy Spirit was, let alone have any feelings for Jesus.

Yet I agreed to be godparent without hesitation, feeling privileged, out of love for my cousin and her parents, rather than a spirit led calling in faith. However, it was the beginning of me asking more about who believed in God or not in my family and reflecting upon my own disbeliefs, and what does it mean to be a godparent.

I did not feel at all guilty or hypocritical as I stood up in a packed church and being asked by the vicar if "I rejected the devil; denounced evil; repented of sins; turned to Christ as Saviour; submitted to Christ as Lord; came to Christ as the way, truth and life?"

I answered after each of those that "I reject them; I renounce them; I repent of them; I turn to Christ; I submit to Christ; I come to Christ".

Me saying those words had no expectation that it would, or could, inwardly or outwardly transform me, or my cousin, or anyone else! It was just a religious ritual wasn't it?

I didn't attend church again other than for weddings, Christenings, and funerals, not for another 20 years!

Showing

20 years later, many of you listening today will remember attending my own full immersion baptism at Christ Church Oakworth, one of the most amazing experiences of my life. And way beyond expectation of just simply being a religious ceremony. Many were confirmed alongside me that day too.

I will never forget the bishop of Bradford saying to me as he and the vicar brought me back up out of the water. "was that what you expected?". I answered "no". The experience was nothing like I expected in any way at all, which was to be a quick dunking, and up.

Now I know how this is going to sound to some cynics, but it really was the closest I can imagine anyone coming to experiencing being born. I know full well that logically, scientifically, factually I was only under for a matter of seconds, but yet it felt like I had gone somewhere else, completely gone out of my mind any focus on being in church, under water or its temperature, who was watching, or on holding my breath, no fear, no distractions. Nothing at all like the full awareness and overwhelming senses you have when under water in a pool or sea.

I clearly remember how dramatic it was coming out of the water, opening my eyes, letting all the overwhelming senses, light, awareness of a packed

church, come flooding back, but firstly my focus was distracted on the fact that I couldn't catch my breath for quite a few seconds!

As I look back it makes sense that people asked me afterwards "was it cold because it took your breath away?" What happened was more astounding than that as I remember the thought that had popped into my head "you can breath now". That is when I finally did. I really do associate that with how it must be for babies breathing for the very first time. As an adult I immediately had a clear message in my mind that it was the beginning and that it would be challenging as well as amazing. Hence the need of others, faith, and lots of prayer.

From then on, whether people believe in the spirituality of our baptism or faith journeys or not, it is an important part of Christian faith to share it anyway, not solely with other Christians who we decide would want to comfortably listen, devoid of any risk eye rolling or rejection. Hence who we have been called to follow as Christians being so often a great challenge, and out of our comfort zones.

It was to take 20 years before my cousin, and I were to begin sharing what it means to be baptised into a life changing, transformative journey through faith. And what it means to be a godparent. And especially being spirit led and called to follow beyond many 'out of comfort zones' times. Every one of those callings that were followed proving that God sees with a full confidence in us all, way beyond what we can ever see in ourselves.

God's baptismal words that were once reduced to mere religious ritual, had come to fruition in their real invitation to spiritually transformative, inwardly and outwardly, life changing reality. Baptism always follows faith no matter how small. (see Acts 8:13, 36; 16:15, 30-33; 18; 8, 1 Cor. 1:16).

When we accept the baptismal invitation to a change of mind or direction and its' promises that come with it, may differ for us. But the inviter

remains the same. God remains the same. Responding to that can be just as spiritually transforming today, as it was in the time and culture of the gospels.

Sharing

Responding includes recognising that it is not only an individual act but a beginning of becoming part of a Christian family.

As Paul tells us, 'by one spirit we were all baptised into one body' (1 Cor. 12:13) and that 'as many of you as were baptised into Christ have put on Christ' (Galatians 3:27).

In Colossians 2:11, 12 we read 'you were buried with him in baptism, in which you were also raised with him through faith in the working of God, who raised him from the dead'.

In Matthew 28:19-20 Jesus told his disciples to 'go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptising them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you'.

Therefore, people should not be surprised when we don't encourage private baptisms and find it so important sharing this amazing beginning in church services, all family, friends, and congregation together. Or when we love to keep in touch afterwards in the hope of sharing in their new life.

How much we spiritually connect whilst at baptisms to Jesus' baptism - or whether we just see religious ritual - or we put the feelings of joy, peace, light and hope, down to being only due to our love for the person being baptised - depends on our readiness, and openness to see God at work there or not.

Mark isn't proclaiming that it is a private exclusive thing, and neither is the Church of England today as we read two of our marks of mission are, "to

teach, baptise and nurture new believers” and to “proclaim the good news of the Kingdom”.

God’s Love

Mark makes it quite clear by proclaiming his gospel to be the beginning of good news about Jesus Christ, the Son of God (1:1). People are so attracted to John’s message and baptism because there is so much to connect him to being the embodiment of what the great prophets foretold and prayed for.

Isaiah in prayer that God ‘would tear open the heavens and come down’ (64:1).

Today, Mark verse 10 shows Isaiah’s prayer being answered as Jesus ‘sees the heavens being torn open’ after his baptism. The old idea of there being a huge gulf between God and us, unreachable, inaccessible somewhere far off, was now gone forever.

Mark 15:38-39 connects and confirms an ever accessible, graceful forgiving of sins God, not a vengeful angry one, through his Son Jesus, when upon his death on the cross ‘the temple veil is ripped from top to bottom’, which prompts the surprising testimony and coming to faith of the Roman centurion who proclaims ‘truly, this man was God’s Son’. (38-39).

Isaiah chapter 63:11 in the wilderness God had ‘put within his people his holy spirit’ and in verse 14 ‘the spirit gave them rest’.

Today, we are reminded that the spirit ‘descended on Jesus like a dove’. The same Pentecostal Holy Spirit symbol and spirit we are gifted with in our hearts, minds and lives today.

Verse 11 reminds us that the voice of heaven now confirms Jesus’ identity as the beloved Son of God, whom he loves and is well pleased with, removing any doubts the oneness trinity of God, Jesus, and Holy Spirit.

Elijah in 2 Kings chapter 1 verse 8 is described as being a ‘hairy man, with a leather belt around his waist’, which obviously mirrors John’s appearance, and people had also been promised a messenger by Isaiah (40:3) to ‘prepare the way for the Lord, make straight in the wilderness a path for our God’.

There was promise of a return of the great prophet Elijah (Malachi 4:5).

We can see why the people were so attracted to John’s baptismal message.

Mark reminds us where our focus should be. On the one who is coming, the one who John is the forerunner to, to pave the way for, to make a straight path for, to prepare for the one who baptises us not only with water in repentance and seeking of God’s forgiveness like John did, but the one who was to baptise all with the Holy Spirit and its’ hope and promise to create a determined faithful response within us. That has the power to change hearts, minds, and lives.

Let us Pray.

Lord, we ask that we find time to think about our own beginnings in faith; our own baptisms, or why we have yet to respond to your invitation in baptism;

what you have previously called us to do since;

what you may be calling us to do now.

May we spend time with you in reflection.

We pray that we will remember anew, as we begin our new year, with all its many challenges, and with all its many joys, that you remain our heartfelt focus as our strength and our example.

Amen