

## **Baptism of Christ**

A sermon preached by the Rector, the Very Revd Tim Barker, at the parish church of St Andrew Guernsey on Sunday 12 January 2020.

*Readings: Isaiah 60 vv 1-6 and Matthew 2 vv 1-12*

When I was younger, I used to enjoy reading the stories of the Greek myths, with their tales of heroes and the adventures of the gods whom the ancient Greeks believed lived on Mount Olympus. It has to be said that the gods of ancient Greek mythology weren't good role models. Their behaviour was often, frankly, appalling. They took advantage of each other and seemed to use human beings as their playthings, pawns in their struggles and jealousy of each other.

The ancient Greeks weren't unique in worshipping gods whose behaviour and standards left much to be desired. This is one reason why the people of Israel were marked out as different. The God of Israel, the God of Abraham and Isaac and Jacob, the God who led his people out of slavery in Egypt and settled them in their land and who spoke words of encouragement and warning to them through the prophets – this God was markedly different.

Little wonder that Israel's neighbours and conquerors, from the Babylonians to the Romans, weren't sure what to make of this people – or of their God. He was different. God wanted to communicate with his people. He loved them with a fierce passion. He had to come among them in a way that was completely unique.

The distinctive feature of the Christian understanding of God's revelation of himself and his burning love for humanity is that it is focused in a person. The highest expression given to this is the belief that Jesus is the eternal Son of God, the second Person of the divine Trinity. One implication of this is that whatever is human may be the bearer of the divine; so fully is Christ divine and so completely is he human that the whole of humanity shares in the touch of God's divine nature, just as the whole of God came to be encapsulated in a human person.

This was so mind-boggling, so different to anything else that human beings have ever experienced, that it's hardly surprising that the early Church, even the most committed followers of Jesus, struggled to come to terms with all the implications and struggled to put it into words. That came at the end of years of debate with the creed, the statement of Christian faith, that we know as the Nicene Creed and which is so important that it has pride of place in the Communion service.

The Nicene Creed makes no reference to Jesus' baptism, but the inauguration of Jesus' public ministry has a significant place in the gospels – even if Jesus' baptism by John raises some questions.

As a man of his time, responding to God, Jesus was baptized, 'in order to fulfil all righteousness'. It would seem to be more natural, in terms of human understandings of power and authority, that John should be baptized by him. But, remembering that we need to see this event of Jesus' baptism from his standpoint (that is, from the standpoint of one determined to do the will of God), it is Jesus who needs to submit to a ritual washing by John. We might try to explain it like this: Jesus is baptized 'in order to ensure that I do perfectly what is completely right'. God the Father affirms this decision by expressing his approval and by adding the sprinkling of his own words of commendation. The Son of God, who is also son of Mary, is acclaimed by God at his

baptism as his faithful and obedient heir. It is a significant moment of revelation, of epiphany – which is why this feast of the Baptism of Christ has an important place in this Epiphany season.

We are invited to understand the baptised Christ as the anointed one of Israel, God's servant, who brings justice to the nations. Isaiah the prophet describes this as 'sight for the blind and release for prisoners'. Jesus, who is the fulfilment of this prophecy, is the king, who embodies the nations and who will act in justice and usher in a new age of peace, when exile is a thing of the past, and when new things happen both in creation and in human dealings. The God who acts in this way is worthy of all the praise we can muster. He speaks, and worlds obey him, for he is the power at work bringing them into being.

And the significance of this momentous fulfilment of prophecy, which we see in Jesus, is for the whole world. Epiphany is constantly looking, beyond the expected, to God's revelation of himself to the whole of humanity – because he loves the whole of humanity, regardless of who they are and where they come from. Yet it took the early Church time to understand and accept the implications of this expansive generosity of God.

The baptism of Jesus marked him out as God's chosen one. He is the one in whom all nations should trust and the one to whom all prophecies point. The exciting thing about this is that here is the God of Israel setting out to fulfil his own promise that all nations, all people, may be the inheritors of his promises to Israel. In other words, the whole human race is his chosen people. Not just Israel.

The infant Church found this a difficult lesson to learn, but learn it they did. As the life of the early Church unfolds in the New Testament, we see many examples of how the Church is called to leap across all boundaries that separate people from one another, so that all may find their unity as human beings in the body of Jesus, who is the Son of the one God of all. Where those boundaries remain, we are charged to cross them, even destroy them, so that God's will is done.