

12th January 2025 – Baptism of Christ (Year C)

The sea along the North Cornish coastline, can be particularly powerful. I remember, as a teenager standing in the crashing waves, waiting for a suitable wave to try and surf in. Suddenly, I was unexpectedly caught off-guard by a huge breaker that completely knocked me off my feet and fully submerging me under the water. I emerged further down the beach gasping for breath, only to be knocked off my feet by another wave. I eventually managed to struggle to the shore, sit down and get my breath back. It was a scary experience, but I lived to tell the story!

Today, the Church celebrates the baptism of Christ. The Greek word for baptism means “to immerse, submerge; to make whelmed (i.e. fully wet)” In baptism, a candidate would be fully immersed in water. Baptism by full immersion is of course still offered by many churches. However, in the Anglican Tradition it commonly involves the sprinkling of water on the candidate’s head rather than thrusting them under water.

There has been much debate as to why Jesus chose to submit to baptism by John. However as one phrase in Luke’s narrative gives us a hint: “Now when all the people were baptised, and when Jesus had also been baptised...”. Luke sees in Jesus' willingness to be baptised, an echo of his Incarnation – a willingness to fully immerse himself in the world. Throughout his Gospel Luke takes care to point out how Jesus intentionally reached out to the marginalised and powerless and how he touched the untouchables – the ritually unclean. At his baptism, Jesus in great humility identified with humanity in all its weakness, fragility and sin and though sinless himself, submitted to this symbolic rite; allowing himself like John’s disciples to be immersed in the waters of the Jordan.

It was whilst Jesus was praying that: “the heaven was opened and the Holy Spirit descended on him like a dove”. This is significant - it was as if a portal in heaven symbolically opened, and the presence of God descended upon him. As if this was not enough a voice affirms “You are my Son the beloved, with you I am well pleased.”

John speaks of another immersion: “I baptise you with water; but one who is more powerful than I is coming... He will baptise you with the Holy Spirit and fire”. To be baptised with the Holy Spirit is to be completely submerged in the presence of God – Father, Son and Holy Spirit. An experience whereby heaven’s portal appears to open and any barrier separating us from God disappears. We find ourselves completely united and subsumed into the Divine Godhead. Eden is restored and we are metaphorically and spiritually reborn. Restored to our maker’s specifications – a divine reset so to speak! Whilst fire is synonymous with purification. If we want to be immersed in Christ we cannot avoid being immersed in his sufferings. As Jesus reminded his followers - if anyone wants to follow me, they must take up their cross. This was the price that many of the first Christians had to pay and countless subsequent martyrs.

Sometimes life can feel totally overwhelming. Isaiah 43 offers us words of encouragement for times such as these. It reminds us that our journey through life will not be without its trials and tribulations. However, during such challenging times, we can appropriate the words which God assured Israel of his love and abiding presence with them. Phrases such as: “I have called you by name, you are mine”, “Do not fear” “I love you” ... “When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you”.

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