

Year A Proper 1 Baptism of the Lord

Isaiah 42: 1-9

Acts 10: 34-43

Matthew 3: 13-17

'¹⁶ As soon as Jesus was baptised, he went up out of the water. At that moment heaven was opened, and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and alighting on him. ¹⁷ And a voice from heaven said, 'This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased.'

These two verses end this short reading from Matthew's gospel that describes the baptism of our Lord. It can all get a bit confusing at this time of year, as we hear readings that seem to jump about in time in Jesus' life.

Last Sunday, the eighth day after Christmas, we celebrated the naming of Jesus. The eighth day of a baby's life is the day in Jewish tradition when children would have had a naming ceremony, and male children were circumcised.

Today's reading has nothing to do with Jesus' early days as a baby or even his teenage years. This passage relates to the start of Jesus's public ministry, at around the age of 30, and is a further act of revelation, an epiphany.

And just to confuse matters, here we are on the 14th day after Christmas, and it won't be until 40 days after Christmas that Mary and the baby Jesus are presented in the Temple – back to a story of Jesus as a five-week-old baby!

Anyway, back to today's reading, focussing on the moment in time when Jesus' public ministry was about to start. Jesus's baptism was, in effect, his commissioning by God.

God affirmed him, calling Jesus his Son.

God affirmed him, calling him his beloved.

God affirmed him, saying he was well-pleased.

And in Matthew's gospel we can't be sure if only Jesus heard these words and saw the Holy Spirit, like a dove, descend on him. Or was it Jesus and John only? Or was it all who had gathered to hear John preach and were waiting to be baptised?

In one sense it really doesn't matter who, apart from Jesus, heard it. All that matters was that God affirmed Jesus, and this affirmation commissioned Jesus into his new role of public ministry of teaching, preaching and healing, of forgiveness and love. The baptism commissioned Jesus into this new identity and the purpose God had set for Jesus for the rest of his life.

As I said earlier Jesus was about 30 when this transformation, this change of his life's purpose was made known, when he was commissioned by God into his new identity and public role. Jesus' baptism, at one level, didn't change who he was, but did radically change his life's purpose and impacts on us today.

It leads me to think about our own baptism – not our original baptism, which for most of us would have been when we were babes in arms – but I am thinking about a symbolic baptism we can imagine today.

If you were preparing to be baptised today, and God was to commission you to new work, in an eternal relationship with our loving God, and being a faithful witness to God's truth in the world, what do you sense God is calling you to be in the world?

You enter the water as one thing and come out as another.

You enter the water as your old self, and whilst in the water God's transforming power and love is at work. You rise up out of the water with God saying you are loved, and God is well-pleased with you.

What transformation has taken place? To use a modern phrase, you have been re-purposed. I wonder what purpose God is calling you to be in this coming year?

What gifts do you have that God may be calling you to use? What may God be testing you with, or putting on your way, or settling in your lap, that will demand you to change, to have a different purpose. Where might you have felt God prompting you to stretch, to go beyond your comfort zone?

As you symbolically and metaphorically rise out of the water and hear God say, you are my son or daughter, you are loved by God and I am well-pleased with you, what changes is God encouraging you to embrace? What may your purpose be, what may God wish to open up to you to do in this world?

My personal experiences of those moments of prompting that I have responded to are when I have acted with my heart and not with my head; when I have not let my rational brain overrule the compassionate heart, or when I have tried to stop and count the cost rather than respond to the Spirit. We each have our unique experiences of being fashioned by and responding to the Spirit.

As we enter into this New Year, may you know God's love and know that God is well-pleased with you. May the Holy Spirit lead you into the ways of Christ our Saviour, indwelling within each of us.

I wish to end with a prayer from the liturgy for confirmation and affirmation of our baptismal vows.

God of mercy and love,

new birth by water and the Spirit is your gift,
a gift none can take away;
grant that your servants may grow into the fullness of the stature of
Christ.

Fill them with the joy of your presence.

Increase in them the fruit of your Spirit:
the spirit of wisdom and understanding,
the spirit of love, patience and gentleness,
the spirit of wonder and true holiness.

Renew their lives in Christ and bring to completion
all that your calling has begun.

Amen.