

SERMON – 10 JANUARY 2021 – ACTS 19.1-7, MARK 1.4-11

In the name of the Father and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.



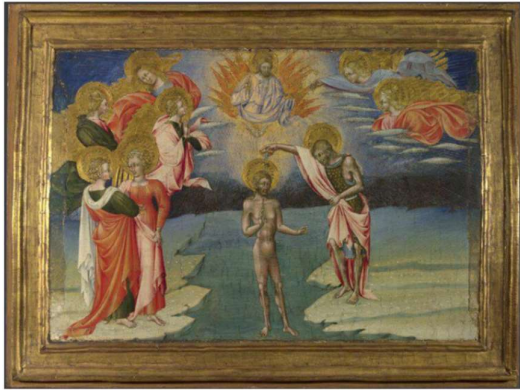
*St John the Baptist preaching, The Ansidei Altarpiece, San Fiorenzo, Perugia
Raphael - National Gallery of London*

It always seems a bit odd that we have John the Baptist a couple of Sundays before Christmas, and then we have the Baptism of Christ a couple of Sundays after Christmas. But it should highlight for us all, the importance of baptism.

It was important to Jesus. As a Jewish boy he had been received into faith, circumcised on the eighth day, and he was presented in the temple forty days after his birth – we’ll celebrate Candlemas, the Feast of the Presentation of Christ in the Temple, at the end of this month. He was taken to the Temple at the age of 12 – basically his Bar Mitzvah when the Jewish boy becomes a man. As a man in Nazareth one assumes he was part of the regular worship of God – perhaps his rabbi wondered if this carpenter should be persuaded to train to be a rabbi himself, or perhaps he just ensured he was on the fabric committee!

At the age of thirty something in Jesus told him it was now time to start the work to which God had called him. It would be fascinating to know if he just woke up one morning, or if it was several months of that nagging voice, or whether his mum sat him down and said “Son, you were not born to be a carpenter.”

John the Baptist was Jesus’ cousin – and you get the impression he had been a holy man from a very early age. John was certainly on the margins.



The Baptism of Christ, Giovanni di Paolo - National Gallery of London

We can't really put him in a 21st century context, but let's just say he would be the sort of man we'd not feel comfortable at having in one of our churches. Perhaps he is the man who stands in the middle of town trying to convict people of their sins – the sort of man I try and avoid, especially when I'm wearing a dog collar.

And yet, he could also pull a crowd, he challenged, and people followed. Repentance, baptism, commitment, change – I have no doubt that today there will be some right wing American preachers using John as an illustration while they support last week's protests – those for whom Mr Trump is a Messianic figure, and they exist. I am also aware that preachers like me, on the other side of the political spectrum, will use him as an emblem of justice, change, repentance. Life, politics, religion are all intertwined – our faith must affect the way we look at this world, the way we interact with other people, the way our Society should be run. The skill, the challenge, is getting the balance right – and weaving love, forgiveness, respect, good Christian values, in with all of this.

We don't know if Jesus and John had met regularly over the last 30 years – but Mark suggests that John knew who Jesus was, was expecting him, and baptised him. In Matthew's gospel John debates whether he can – you are the Messiah, you should be baptising me – but he does what he knows he must do, and God affirms this 'You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.'

Baptism wasn't a regular part of Jewish life, a Jewish baby was not baptised. It may have been used as part of a welcoming of people who became Jews, but that didn't really happen very often. There were rituals of cleansing, of the washing away of sin, but it wasn't part of mainstream faith.



The Baptism of Cornelius, Alberti Carlieri

In the Acts of the Apostles you have the baptism of Cornelius (chapter 10) – he was a Roman centurion of the Italian cohort, a God-fearing man, who believes in Jesus, who wants to be a follower – as do some of his relatives and friends. He isn't a Jew, he is a gentile, a foreigner, an outside, and Peter welcomes them into the faith of Christ by baptising him. The important thing is that “While Peter was still speaking, the Holy Spirit fell upon all who heard the word. The circumcised believers who had come with Peter were astounded that the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out even on the Gentiles, for they heard them speaking in tongues and extolling God.”

There is no argument – God is at work. In chapter 16 you have the baptism of Lydia and the jailer at Philippi – again, the Spirit is at work. In Acts 19 we have the passage we read – and here we have Paul in Ephesus, which is in present-day Turkey. Here we have some disciples who seem to have become part of this new faith through the preaching of John the Baptist. It's odd that we miles from the River Jordan, twenty years after John was baptising. It is a reminder that people find faith in many different ways – and Paul helped deepen their faith, teaching about the Holy Spirit and its power, welcoming them into something bigger, baptising them into what was now a church – what was becoming a fellowship of Christians right across the Roman Empire.



Within quite a short period of time, we know there were people being baptised in Britain – this is probably a baptistry pool at the Roman fort of Vindolanda, right up on Hadrian’s Wall. As Christianity became the state religion, it became the normal thing for everyone to be baptised – and that was the norm until the last century. In 1980 one in three children were baptised into the Church of England, now it is less than one in ten – and, of course, those numbers have crashed even further in the last year. We are churches that welcome far more people for Christening than most churches do – and I do believe we’re right to do so – but it will be fascinating to see if the numbers pick up again when we get back to normal, or whether it’s another part of our Christian service to our community, that our community says it no longer wants.

If you’ve read the Noticesheet – which you’ll find on the front page of the website – you’ll see there is an Open Deanery Synod tomorrow evening, and +Libby is telling us what her vision is for the life of our Diocese. If you’d like to attend, get in touch, and we can sort out the Zoom link. The argument goes that the post-Covid church is going to very different to where we were, and the decline that many churches were experiencing – declines in attendance, in money, in influence – are going to mean we need to re-think church, how we do it, what we do, how we pay for it.



St Matt’s window

In our two churches we weren’t doing badly before Covid hit. St Matthew’s numbers were slowly creeping up, and St Edmund’s were staying level despite the fact a large number of our long-standing members have died over the past four years. Both churches were quite strong, and people saw us as welcoming. We both maintained quite a good position in our communities, financially we could cope, and usually we had enough people to do what is needed.

How many of those statements are true a year later is an interesting question - and one we will need to explore together as 2021 goes on. I doubt we will ever go back to six services across our two churches on a Sunday, which for some will be a disaster and a betrayal, and for others will be an opportunity to do

things differently. We will still need churchwardens – as our buildings need to be cared for, maintained, etc, etc – a reminder we only have one person willing to do that role at St Edmund's – and come the AGMs in May that is going to be a major problem. If we want services and buildings – and a happy Vicar – we need churchwardens, and they can't be conjured out of thin air. People need to step forward, in that, and in all aspects of church life.



But I am not going to be depressed. 2021 is not going to be an easy year, but we've survived 2020. Our buildings may be closed, but we're managing to worship together. We're keeping in touch, we're caring, we are helping each other get through. We are loving and caring for the wider community, our families, our friends, and those we meet day in and day out. We're not perfect, of course we're not, we're failing in all sorts of ways – but the Holy Spirit is at work in and through us, and God is using us in these darkest of days.

So hang on in there, keep smiling, keep praying, know the Spirit is at work, and God is with us. Amen.