



First Sunday of Epiphany  
Sunday 9 January 2011

---

## The Baptism of Christ

A sermon by Revd Katherine Hedderly

### Readings: Acts 10.34-43; Matthew 3.13-end

I wonder how you've entered the new year, dipped your toe in, beginning to pick up where you left off before Christmas, paddling perhaps or plunging straight into work, routines, and all that life is just now for you. There is often a certain sense of floundering around at the start of the year, with New Year resolutions, helping us to take control of the chaos and wrestle the uncertainty of life into order. It's at times like this that we get a sense of what the ebb and flow of our life is like, aware of the undercurrents that pull and steer us, what draws us on to life, what may seem to overwhelm us, relationships, work, the state of the economy, our finances, our health.

In his baptism, that we hear of in Matthew's account today, Jesus freely chooses to plunge into the waters of his life. It is the gateway into the particular ebb and flow of what his life will be. It is an Epiphany moment, when the identity or core of who Jesus really is, is revealed to us. And it is in this freely chosen humble action that Jesus allows the waters of *our* life to go over him. His identity is caught up with ours. He enters into the deepest depths and pull of the human condition. Our sorrow and suffering and sinfulness, our hopes and excitements. Our life and death.

A few days before Christmas I went with my husband Loren to a funeral of a dear Croatian friend who had died aged 80. Then a few days after Christmas, on the first of January we went to see the newborn twins of friends. So Christmas was bookended this year for us by death and life, the undercurrents of life were strong.

The most moving part of the funeral was not in church but in the cemetery. Cold, and quiet and carpeted with thick snow. The only sound, as the group of close family and friends made their way across to the grave side, was the noise of feet crunching on virgin snow, like the sound of cornflower pressed down; the funeral director carefully guiding the pallbearers with the coffin along the path. It was poignant and quiet and dignified and very beautiful. Being there with friends was important. We were deep in the waters and currents of life with them.

The other side of Christmas in UCL hospital up the road, seeing two-day-old twins brought home what new life is like. In the arrival of these children, our friends' lives were plunged into something new. They were looking at the world in a new way, everything had changed, their relationship, their way of seeing and experiencing the world. The deep joy of new life seemed to wash over them and it was infectious, you can't stand outside the experience but are compelled to join in with the delight of it. In his baptism Jesus commits to being alongside us in all that life is for us, offering us a way to connect to God in it and through it.

Matthew's account of Jesus' baptism shows us that he does this in humble obedience, fully submitting to the creative life and energy of God who comes in the gentle touch of the spirit, speaks words of affirmation and love as father, listening and receiving himself the anointing and vocation as Son.

It is only in the Gospel of Matthew that we have the conversation between Jesus and John the Baptist that addresses that obvious question. If baptism is for the forgiveness of sins, then why should the one without sin submit to it? Surely it is John who should be baptised by Jesus. Jesus'

response is his first words in the Gospel, and are a summary of his own vocation... 'let it be so for now, for it is proper for us in this way to fulfil all righteousness'. Matthew's Jesus has come to follow the way that seems to depart from what is expected, but is actually the way to life and the fulfilment of all that has been promised. It is the same reversal that we find in John's Gospel, as in the Upper Room Jesus takes the inferior role and kneels, despite protests, to wash the disciples' feet. Jesus takes the costly, unexpected and humble route in order to bring us life and freedom. That is the only way in which he can fully express the life of God to us. This is who he is.

This sense of Jesus as Son of God and humble servant resonates in the words he hears from the Father as he rises up out of the water. 'This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased'. These words come from Psalm 2 where Israel's anointed king is described as God's son and from the song of the humble unnamed suffering servant in Isaiah 42, which is the OT reading in the lectionary for today; the one whose gentle and life giving ways of justice, powerfully reverse the ways of the world.

Jesus submits humbly to his baptism but there is no more powerful moment. The heavens opened, the voice of God, the anointing by the spirit that comes as a dove - like the spirit that hovers over the waters in Genesis - are all great motifs of the revelation of God. This intimate Epiphany moment is Jesus come as the new creation, come to do his father's will, in the power of the spirit. And the rest of his ministry will be a living out of all he has done and said, heard and experienced in this moment. It will end with another baptism as he enters into the journey of Good Friday to Easter Day, plunging into the death and life of the Cross and Resurrection, in humble obedience to the Father and for the love of the whole world - taking the unexpected costly way that leads to life.

In our reading from Acts we find ourselves in the middle of a scene in the house of the faithful and prayerful Roman centurion Cornelius who is longing to plunge fully into the life of God. He has gathered his whole family and household to hear Peter, whom God has encouraged him to send for. Peter preaches the message of the Gospel to them, telling them about the life and ministry, the death and resurrection of Jesus, of the forgiveness and healing and peace he offers. A message Peter now understands is for the whole world, a world that includes this Gentile audience gathered around him.

This is the beginnings of the church in action. Peter finds that he and this faithful man and all around them are even then caught up deep in the life and purposes of God. In the next few verses we hear how the Holy Spirit comes upon all who are listening, to the surprise of the believers who have come with Peter. And Peter sees this as the sign that there is nothing to stop them all being baptised and becoming part of the Christian community. Prayer and faith and longing to follow God, being prepared to do what is called for, not what is expected, has brought Peter and Cornelius and all gathered in that home, into the life of God. God is moving powerfully in the currents of their lives and in the life of the church.

Knowing ourselves as God's beloved is the key to living out the commission of our Baptism. Being aware that we belong to God in Christ and that through him we belong to one another in community. Our baptism calls us to believe in Jesus, to be aware of the ebb and flow of his life flowing in us and through us, open to his promptings and encouragement, living lives of loving service, witnessing in the ways only we know how, often including and making space for those we wouldn't expect, crossing barriers of prejudice and expectation.

In the new film *The King's Speech*, King George VI struggles to overcome his stammer as he is plunged unexpectedly into the role of King, at a chaotic time for the nation not far from war. His speech therapist uses unconventional methods to help him connect to the deepest experiences of his life. With strength and courage, he struggles to find his voice, the key being that he is heard and affirmed in the deepest reaches of life. It is a moving story and going onto YouTube and listening to

the real version of the speech as the real George VI announces that Britain is at war, all the more poignant when you have some understanding of the costly struggles behind it.

Whatever the stammers and stutters that we overcome in our own lives to be true to our calling, through the ebb and flow that pulls us, Jesus in his baptism and all that flows from it, is alongside us. As we plunge in to the currents and experiences through him we too hear the words of encouragement 'This is my son, this is my daughter, with whom I am well pleased.'