

Worship - Sunday 10th January 2021

The Baptism of Jesus



Opening music: Hail to the Lord's anointed (*Cruger*)

Good morning everyone, and welcome to today's worship with the churches of Fleet URC and Beacon Hill URC. We are so glad you have chosen to join us today as we worship the Lord together and have fellowship! We hope anyone who has not worshiped with us before will feel at home with us.

Pause

Call to worship

God says:

Look! See my chosen servant,
the One in whom I utterly delight;
**I have placed my Spirit on him,
he will bring true justice to the nations.**

When Jesus was baptised, the heavens opened up,
and the Spirit came down like a dove;
and there was a voice from heaven saying:
**"This is my dearly loved Son,
with whom I am delighted."**

The joy of the Lord be with you all.
And also with you.

written by Bruce Prewer, and posted on Bruce Prewer's Home page. <http://www.bruceprewer.com/DocA/10BAPTIS.htm>

Prayers of thanksgiving and confession

God of enlightenment,
we thank you for the way that you have brought light into our lives through the message and life of Jesus.
We are amazed
at how much that message makes sense of life,
giving real meaning and purpose to our existence.
The Good News that Jesus embodied
is the best news we could possibly have.

But we confess that there are so many times
when we fail to reach others with that same message.
We do try, in all kinds of different ways,
but people seem to be deaf to our words
and blind to your enlightening truth.
That is nothing new,
but we cannot afford to stop trying
just because things have always been like that.

Please, God,
teach us how to be more effective messengers.
For there are so many distractions
that can turn people away from your truth.
There are so many people happy in their belief
that our faith is an unnecessary part of life.
There are so many lost and lonely ones
wandering in darkness
and having no idea where to find your light.

Help us as we keep on trying to bring the light of your love
into empty and misguided lives.

Guide us, God of love,
as we seek to interpret your Good News
in ways that are relevant for these days and for this time. Amen

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Words of Assurance

The love of God is always offered to us,
freely, joyfully, for all eternity.

Rejoice, dear friends,

this is the Good News of our Lord. Amen.

We join now in saying the prayer Jesus taught his followers:

Our Father, who art in heaven,

hallowed be thy name.

Thy Kingdom come, thy will be done,

on earth as it is in heaven

Give us this day our daily bread.

And forgive us our trespasses,

as we forgive those who trespass against us.

And lead us not into temptation,

but deliver us from evil.

For thine is the kingdom, the power and the glory, for ever and

ever. Amen

Readings:

Mark 1: 4 -11 read by Bridget Mitchell

⁴John the baptizer appeared in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. ⁵And people from the whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem were going out to him, and were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins. ⁶Now John was clothed with camel's hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey. ⁷He proclaimed, "The one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to stoop down and untie the thong of his sandals. ⁸I have baptized you with water; but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit."

⁹In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. ¹⁰And just as he was coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on him. ¹¹And a voice came from heaven, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased."

Acts 19: 1 – 7 read by Robert Mitchell

¹⁹While Apollos was in Corinth, Paul passed through the interior regions and came to Ephesus, where he found some disciples. ²He said to them, "Did you receive the Holy Spirit when you became believers?" They replied, "No, we have not even heard that there is a Holy Spirit." ³Then he said, "Into what then were you baptized?" They answered, "Into John's baptism." ⁴Paul said, "John baptized with the baptism of repentance, telling the people to believe in the one who was to come after him, that is, in Jesus." ⁵On hearing this, they were baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus. ⁶When Paul had laid his hands on them, the Holy Spirit came upon them, and they spoke in tongues and prophesied— ⁷altogether there were about twelve of them.

Hymn: Be still for the presence of the Lord

sung by the Newcastle Virtual Choir Project

Be still for the presence of the Lord,
the holy one, is here.

Come bow before him now

with reverence and fear.

In him no sin is found:

we stand on holy ground.

Be still for the presence of the Lord,

the holy one, is here

Be still for the glory of the Lord

is shining all around

He burns with holy fire;

with splendour he is crowned.

How awesome is the sight:

our radiant king of light.

Be still for the glory of the Lord
is shining all around

Be still for the power of the Lord
is moving in this place.
He comes to cleanse and heal;
to minister his grace.
No work too hard for him:
in faith receive from him.
Be still for the power of the Lord
is moving in this place.

Words & Music: David J. Evans (b. 1957)

Reflection: And we're off.....

I wonder what is it about a book that captures you immediately and makes you want to read on? There must be something in the first lines, I find, that draws you in and makes you curious as to what is to follow and often a sense of pace.

Today, we hear our first reading from the Gospel of Mark, which is one of the set Gospels in this lectionary year. In a week dominated by news of a UK wide lockdown once again as the variant of COVID19 spreads rapidly, the NHS is at full stretch & everyday life is disrupted for the protection of all, I found myself looking for the familiarity and, dare I say, distraction, of reading & seeking to increase my understanding of faith, finding that in pausing to reflect on this Gospel's opening. I found myself caught up in those verses we heard this morning and peeling away the layers of what is written but not obviously significant in just 8 verses of this Gospel. It became a Bible study and I'd like to share some of that with you today.

I said to you last Sunday that we needed to be ready to follow the adult Jesus on the road from baptism to cross: Mark's Gospel does just that in its dramatic opening. No shepherds, wise ones or nativity for him! In a few verses, readers meet Jesus as an adult at the Jordan River ready to be baptized by his cousin, John. Mark writes with a sense of excitement and action from the onset.

Mark's Gospel presents the story of Jesus in a straightforward way, with emphasis on what Jesus did, rather than on his words and teachings. But that doesn't mean there is no depth underlying what appears to be a straightforward telling. To its first readers there were many layers of history and awareness underpinning the succinct and fast moving writing that's worth exploring as we start to read this Gospel.

Mark packs a great deal of content into his introductory sentences. It feels as if this could be a dramatic opening to a play. The scene is the wilderness around the Jordan.

The wilderness has immediate echoes of the Exodus story. It is a hostile place. It is the place where wild animals live and which hostile spirits were believed to inhabit. Yet it is also the place to meet God – as we know from the Old Testament - in burning bushes and on a mountain. It is the place where Israel came to know Yahweh and received the Law. It is the place of refuge for Elijah when his life is in danger.

It has political significance, too. It is the place to which political refugees fled for safety, and also the place, in Jesus' time, where would-be revolutionaries gathered to train. In Roman terms, it was a place of resistance and opposition – just as it had been in Ahab's day, when Elijah and the other prophets gathered there because of their opposition to Ahab's regime.

And because this is a hostile place, it's not where you would expect to see crowds. They are out of place. Their dress would probably identify them as city-dwellers from Jerusalem. It's immediately disconcerting: because if John is the Messenger – heralding the Messiah which the Jewish faith awaited – then why are the crowds coming *out* of Jerusalem? Their belief was that when the Messiah arrived it would mean people from all nations flocking *to* Jerusalem! It's a reversal of that expectation & must have spoken volumes to the first century readers that something different was afoot.

From Mark's account it sounds like everybody's coming to see John at work and experiencing baptism, that is—confessing, repenting, and beginning anew. Perhaps it was the place to be and be seen. The description of John's clothing & diet draw a vivid picture, almost fitting for the wild landscape in which this narrative is set. It draws you in to think perhaps that he is the central character.

But.....

John the Baptizer quickly makes it abundantly clear that there will be one who is different, one who will baptize with the Spirit. John delivers his opening line and dispels any idea that it is him.

What an introduction! If *this* isn't the main character, who is? Are you on the edge of your seat? And now here we are: Jesus comes to be baptized.

Even in this moment, in such a short sentence there is so much more underlying Mark's narrative. Look where Jesus comes from: 'from Nazareth of Galilee'! To the first readers, the Galilee was the back of beyond. The southern Jews despised the Galileans, separated as they were from Jerusalem by Samaria. The Galilee is 'the wilderness' – at least as far as any self-respecting religious Jew of the time is concerned. There is nothing noteworthy about Nazareth. If God is going to do something, it isn't going to be there! Mark would have had his readers totally off balance.

And although the baptism is only fleetingly referred to, this is a pivotal moment. It was a moment that was so powerful for Jesus that he could actually see the Holy Spirit coming down from heaven to alight upon his heart as gently as a dove. It was a moment so powerful that he could hear the actual breath of God speaking to him, saying, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased."

What did that mean to Jesus? Growing up as he did, steeped in phrases and stories from the books that you and I call the Old Testament, surely the words spoken by God into the heart of Jesus must have reminded him strongly of those things that he had heard

all of his life. Jesus may have recalled the words of Isaiah, from whom Jesus is seen to quote more than any other source in the Gospels. The phrasing of the voice from heaven is reminiscent of the 42nd chapter of Isaiah, where it says,

Here is my servant, whom I uphold, my chosen, in whom my soul delights; I have put my spirit upon him (Isaiah 42:1).

We can't ever quite comprehend what an epiphany that must have been for Jesus. But we can see that from that moment on, he was fully engaged in God's work. He gave himself over completely to teaching, to responding to people with compassion, to healing them, forgiving them, and calling them to faith. He never wavered.

He gave up his life for us, so much that now, all these centuries later, his life, all we will hear in the weeks to come, is so familiar to us. In eight short, pithy, verses, Mark has introduced Jesus's mission to us. Until this moment, Jesus has been indistinguishable from the rest of the mass of humanity at the water's edge. Now we see the truth about Jesus – the meaning of his life and mission. It comes directly from heaven itself. The Spirit, in the form of the dove, descends and rests on him.

All that in those few verses, and there is so much more we could consider – the nature of repentance, baptism itself and what it has meant to each of usBut in these days when we are at home, may you feel excited at opening your Bible at Mark's Gospel, sit with him and really engage with the writer who reveals so much to us when we pause and peel back the layers beneath the words to the Word that he sought to bring. The baptism of Jesus tells us that God's work has begun; may that be true for you in these difficult days.

Prayers of Intercession

Responsive prayer: - God who brought light

God, who brought light from darkness, we bring before you those who need new light in their lives.

We remember those who live in deep sorrow, through bereavement, depression, illness, family breakdown, or abuse.

Into their darkness, bring your light.

We remember those who have lost all hope, through unemployment, terminal illness, anxiety, addiction, money problems, or lack of motivation.

Into their darkness, bring your light.

We remember those who are insecure, because of feelings of inadequacy, bullying by others, problems at home, immaturity, temptation, loneliness, old age, or fear.

Into their darkness, bring your light.

We remember those who are victims of poverty, disease, flood, famine, drought, disaster, conflict, or crime.

Into their darkness, bring your light.

God of all wholeness and healing,
we thank you with all our hearts
for those who are working
with selfless skill and dedication
to sustain our National Health Service.
Grant that they may receive
the resources they require
to meet the demands that each day brings.
Keep them safe and healthy while at work,
and bless their families and loved ones at home. Amen

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God, who brought light from darkness, as we remember these people and so many others, show us how we can help to bring your light into their lives.

For your world's sake. **Amen**

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Blessing:

Go in peace; love and care for one another in the name of Christ;
and may the Spirit of God which filled John and Jesus,
fill your hearts, souls and minds;
may the power of God which upheld them,
strengthen you for each day;
and may the love of God which directed their every action
be your guiding light and your shining star,
both now and forevermore. Amen

— written by Rev. Richard J. Fairchild, and posted on his [Kir-shalom](#) website

Closing music: Shall we gather at the water (*Hansom Place*)

Responses led by John Johnstone

Opening & closing music from <https://www.smallchurchmusic.com/>

Hymn: Be still for the presence of the Lord [Virtual Church Choir - Newcastle Cathedral](#) by permission

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