

10.1.16. All Saints, 9am. Baptism of Jesus

Isaiah 43:1-7, Ps 29, Acts 8:14-17, Luke 3:15-22

Baptised—for What?

Let us imagine for a few moments that we are present at Jesus' baptism. We have travelled about 35 km east from Jerusalem, through desert country, down to the river Jordan. We have heard about this strange figure John, clothed in camel hair like a prophet of old, and have come to see and hear him for ourselves. John has urged us to repent, be sorry for things in our past life which have hurt others and ourselves, and ask God for forgiveness. We decide to join the queue and be baptised, washed clean of wrong doings in the waters of the Jordan. We are willing to change our lives, share what we have with others in need, treat people justly and be satisfied with what we have, as John has told us.

The line is long and moves slowly forward as one by one men and women step into the river with John, symbolically dying to the past by going under the water, and rising again to a new life.

Jesus is one of those in the queue waiting to be baptised. He enters the water and nothing is different or out of the ordinary until after his actual baptism, when we are told that Jesus "was praying".

At this point everything changes, explodes, and God acts!

If someone asked you what prayer was, I wonder what you would say? You might say it is asking God for something—perhaps for the healing of someone who is ill, thanking God for some blessing we have received, or even praising God for being God. All these are prayer, but what happens at Jesus' baptism suggests something else as well.

The words following those of "Jesus was praying", are, "the heaven was opened and the Holy Spirit descended upon him" (heavens torn apart)

I believe that the heart of prayer and encompassing all prayer is shown here as being open to God, putting self aside to focus on God and God's love for all creation. Jesus as a human being was open to God, in a vulnerable loving relationship of giving to and receiving from God.

Jesus gave himself to be baptised by John and used by God. He received the Holy Spirit in a special way, symbolised by a dove. Then he heard a voice from heaven affirming his identity and God's pleasure in what he is doing. "You are my son, my beloved; with you I am well-pleased".

In this brief account, Luke portrays Jesus as one of us waiting for baptism, and after his actual baptism his other identity, the Messiah. Jesus is the one John the Baptist proclaimed as coming, and the one named Saviour and the Messiah by angels in the fields outside of Bethlehem.

Jesus' baptism, his receiving of God's Spirit and the confirmation of God's words prepared him for his life and task as the Messiah. We might expect Jesus would now have a celebratory party with his friends, before commencing his new work, but no. That Spirit, symbolised by a gentle dove becomes a power, which is described in Mark's Gospel as not one that tenderly *led* Jesus into the wilderness or desert, but *drove* him, *threw him out*, like the ball of a fast bowler in cricket, to discover with prayer and fasting how he was to carry out his ministry.

At our baptism we entered water or had water poured over us, were cleansed, forgiven of past sins, received the Spirit, became members of the body of Christ, children of our heavenly Father, and inheritors of the kingdom of God. But that was not the end. We were not 'done' in order to guarantee our place in heaven so that we could proceed in life with one less worry. Our baptism, as for Jesus, was the beginning of our calling or vocation as members of the church to follow Christ. We are to be his body in the world, participating with him in the mission of God by revealing God's love to all where we live.

In carrying out God's mission we shall often fail as well as succeed. As we know only too well, we all make mistakes, deliberately or thoughtlessly hurt or let down others, and so on. The penitential section in every church service, is not there by accident or is an optional extra. We repeatedly need to be forgiven by God and others, and strengthened to pick ourselves up and go on.

To strengthen and guide us in our Christian task we received God's Holy Spirit, as did Jesus. At our baptism, we, or our sponsors (godmothers and godfathers), promised, with the help of God's grace, or Holy Spirit, "to strive to live as a disciple of Christ, loving God with our whole heart, and our neighbour as ourself, until our life's end". Note, it is not just until we retire, can't walk much anymore or are sick, but "until our life's end."

Because many of us were baptised as infants, at our confirmation we

intentionally took on the promises made on our behalf by our adult Christians. The Bishop laid hands on our heads and we again received the Holy Spirit to strengthen us, confirm us, to “proclaim, by word and example, the good news of God in Christ”.

Being a member of Christ’s body, the church, is a dynamic identity that should affect our whole lives, everything we do and every relationship or chance meeting we have with others. Sometimes we shall follow Christ and live out our vocation as members of church organisations such as Mothers’ Union, the catering group, friends for lunch or the Op shop. At other times it will be in organisations outside the church that serve others, like Rotary, CWA or Red Cross. Our membership of the the church will also affect our behaviour at work or when enjoying ourselves playing tennis, bowling or golf. When alone or resting, we still have a responsibility for others; perhaps to pray for those in need.

In his life, Jesus is described as not only praying after his baptism, but also praying in the desert in preparation of his ministry, before choosing his disciples, during his ministry, in the Garden of Gethsemane and on the cross.

There are times when we may not know how to pray or what to pray. In these situations we can follow Jesus by opening ourselves to God. Although we received the Holy Spirit at our baptism and confirmation, we also receive the Spirit at many other times and can always open ourselves to allow that Spirit to work God’s will in and through us. God may then pray through us, without words, as it says in Romans 8:26-27, the Spirit “intercedes with sighs too deep for words. And God, who searches the heart, knows what is the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God.”

Further, if we accept that we are members not only of our own biological family, but also members of Christ’s body the church and members of God’s whole created family, then it makes a difference to how we pray and what we pray for. We become open to God and therefore open to God’s love for all God’s creation, even bits we would prefer to reject.

When a loved family member has achieved something, or a child has been born to relatives, we share in their joy and thanksgiving. When our loved ones are sick, stressed or grieving, we share emotionally their

pain and sorrow. In our prayer that same joyful or painful sharing takes place.

By extending our understanding of what we mean by 'family' and our membership of it, we can rejoice and be thankful for the good and beauty in our church family or the world. And we shall also suffer in and with Christ when, a child's dead body is washed up on a beach in Turkey, civilians enjoying a concert are killed in Paris, people are drowned in floods in China, Australians lose everything in bushfires, refugees are held in Australian detention centres, people are killed in the Sydney Lindt café and the earth and its waters are polluted. Victims, perpetrators and nature are all family and kin, the neighbours we are drawn to love when we love God.

I have conducted many funeral services over the past years. When I listen to eulogies, sometimes I feel sad, at other times I rejoice with the person's achievements and give thanks for their lives. What I have learnt and am still learning, is that every human being is a creation of God and should be respected and revered. We cannot make a judgement about their lives. They are one of us, their life is part of ours and affects us; just like different parts of our body, when sick or well, affect our whole body. It is a bit like being a supporter of a sporting team. When the team wins you rejoice, when it loses and performs dismally, you feel depressed, and perhaps try to make excuses for it. But as a good fan, you remain loyal to your team through its wins and losses, continuing to encourage its players.

In prayer, Jesus offered himself to God at his baptism and received strength and guidance to participate in God's mission. At our baptism, we also open ourselves to God and God's world as members of Christ, and begin our task in that same mission in the power of the Spirit. At times we shall feel the presence of the Spirit like a gentle dove nestling lovingly in our hands, at other times it may drive us to where we don't want to go, to work for justice, to forgive those who have hurt us or to demand our time and energy to help others in need.

May we encourage one another to move forward in this transition time in our parish, carrying out the vocation we have, as a parish church and as individuals, to reveal God's love for others in words and actions wherever we find ourselves.