

Sermon at the Cathedral Eucharist

Readings: [Isaiah 43.1-7](#), [Acts 8.14-17](#), [Luke 3.15-17, 21-22](#)

Baptism of Christ

12 January 2025

The sinless one to Jordan came
to share our fallen nature's blame;
God's righteousness he thus fulfilled
And chose the path his father willed.

Words we have just sung. Written by Derby born and bred George Boone Timms, the Anglo-Catholic priest and hymn writer, and in pre-war years a server and songman of this Cathedral Church. George Timms goes to the heart of the matter. The baptism of Jesus, the 'sinless one', in the river Jordan is the grit in the oyster! It's a bit of the story of Jesus that makes us feel uncomfortable.

At the time many thought that John the Baptist was the promised messiah. In the first century desert a few miles outside Jerusalem, those clustered around him couldn't grasp why John would be baptising with water another whom he said was to be even more powerful and charismatic, and who would baptise with fire. Surely it would be the other way around - the greater must baptise the lesser?

And then for us we struggle with why someone whom we say was 'without sin' needed to undergo a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sin.

As the grit within the story our instinct is that the baptism of Jesus doesn't fit or belong. Yet we all know that it's the grit within the oyster that causes the pearl, the thing of great beauty to grow.

And it all begins deep in the history of the people of God. Five centuries before. Isaiah cried out: Israel's exile in Babylon was coming to its end. God's people are beginning to look forward in hope to a return to the Promised Land and to a new era. Only God could work the miracle of restoration. Only God could bring back those who had been scattered over the known world.

God is the saviour, the one who restores. He is the creator of his people, and only in the power of his love is a new start going to be possible. 'Fear not for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are mine'. In all the best senses of the word, God is the *father* of his people, and it's in the being of God himself that the future is guaranteed. Not least because the force of the water and the severity of the fire before the exiles as they travel across the mountains back to Israel cannot be underestimated.

And we know how the story developed – real hope, a return to Jerusalem, continued failure to live up to God's standards, and then collapse, occupation by the Roman army and silence from the prophets, until a rather weird and unexpected voice began to be heard alongside the river Jordan

So, when God speaks, 'You are my Son, the beloved: with you I am well pleased', Jesus is revealed as the embodiment of Israel. He is part of the community waiting and watching for the bursting through of God's promised kingdom.

He is a corporate, representative figure on whom all the expectations and hopes of the centuries were focused. He becomes Israel itself, the one who passes across the flood of the Jordan River to inhabit the Promised Land and fulfil all the purposes of God. He is the one who will pass through the fire of God's judgement unharmed. God's people, caught up as members of the one who embodies all their diversity, will be safe, will be saved, and will flourish.

And this is the thing of beauty, the pearl, that comes out of Jesus' baptism. Jesus' baptism re-enact the Exodus, His going down into the waters points the way forward to his death by crucifixion, and his emergence from the river to his resurrection. In the waters of baptism Jesus defeats all the powers of the universe that oppose God's ways, all that is unleashed by human sinfulness and self-centredness.

Jesus was baptised to identify with all human beings. He entered the full human experience as perfect yes, but immersing himself in the effect of sin, experiencing the consequence of human disobedience, sharing the blame of our fallen nature, as George Timms put it so succinctly

As the embodiment of God's people Jesus is the suffering servant, the anointed messiah, the one who is full of God's Spirit. Jesus is the one in who's very being God's people are restored and brought back from exile, finally and definitively. Here in the waters of Jesus' baptism, as the Holy Spirit hovers over the Son of God, emerges God's new creation, centred not round a geographical location but focused and begun in one person. This was the new heaven and the new earth, the death of the old order, the beginning of the new, creation transformed in public display.

Baptism is therefore the sacrament of the new order in Christ. It points the way forward to the establishment of God's new creation. It is the sacrament of justice and peace for humanity in Christ.

As we heard Isaiah's references to water and fire, it's impossible not to have in our minds the pictures of flooding here in the East Midlands and the devastating fires fuelled by high winds in Los Angeles. These are tragedies of the people and communities concerned. We have watched the outworking of global warming once again through adverse weather conditions. All over the globe local communities are being challenged and displaced by the impact of excess carbon emission and high temperatures – 2024 was the hottest year on record and the politics of this new year put joint action across the nations under threat.

Faith and its concern for justice and equity amongst all people impels us to press for measures to reduce our carbon footprint. As a Cathedral and on our environmental journey we have achieved the Eco Church Silver Award. We continue our efforts to plan for carbon neutral future, challenging as it is to find solutions for such a beautiful and complex building.

The Baptism of Jesus stands as a sign to us of the new creation in which global heating comes to an end and the injustice of its consequences are overcome; a time when impoverished communities are free from the burden imposed on them by nations rich and powerful.

Christian baptism is our entry into the new heaven and the new earth which God even now is bringing into being. Baptism is the sacrament of a new creation, of a social vision both spiritual and material, which lies in front of us and for which we are called to work.

There are some of us here, including me, who have struggled with our experience of baptism – another piece of grit in the story, if you like. The way St Luke tells the baptism of Jesus suggests that it's a spiritual experience, and it's portrayed as part of Jesus' growing consciousness that he is

someone with a key part in God's plan for the world. Jesus spends time praying and he hears the voice of God.

For most of us, we were baptised as infants or children. We cannot recall that moment at the font when we were incorporated into the body of Christ with water poured over our heads in the name of the Trinity. I remember feeling quite agonised about it, until I began to understand that in baptism the focus is on God, not on ourselves. In baptism, God reaches out to each one of us and claims our lives for himself and his kingdom. The infant child in the arms of the priest is a sign to us all of our dependence on God, and that we respond in our daily lives to God's reaching out to us.

As I reflected, I realised that the emphasis in the Church of England's tradition of baptising people of all ages is on experiencing baptism daily. This is one of the hallmarks of being an Anglican. That we are passionate about being God's baptised people, those who share with the risen Jesus in the new creation, that great restoration of God's people that is God's project until the end of time. We are to say, not 'I was baptised', but 'I *am* baptised'. And that's because each time we see someone baptised we re-appropriate and relive our own baptism whether we can remember it or not.

Each day of our lives as baptised Christians we enter into the death and resurrection of Jesus and renew our participation in the new creation, which is Christ's body, the church. Each day we seek the forgiveness of our sins and commit to the renewal of our lives. Each day we die with Christ and are reborn into the life of the resurrection. Each day we remind ourselves of our solidarity with all God's people and share with each other in a purposeful way, not least in the struggle for environmental change.

And that surely is the thing of beauty that comes from the unexpected baptism of Jesus in the Gospel narratives? 'I am baptised' is the cry of delight that each of us might echo daily as we respond to the love of God poured out upon us. 'I am baptised' is the cry of delight that we might echo as we come to the table before us in a few moments, and internalise the broken bread and the wine poured out - like the water of baptism, symbols of Jesus' death and resurrection - that we allow to shape our lives as baptised Christians, as those who seek to live out God's new creation, dying and rising each day with the risen Christ.

I can only end as I began with Derby's George Timms who wrote:

On you shall all your people feed
and know you are the bread indeed,
Who gives eternal life to those
that with you died, and with you rose.

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

The Very Revd Dr Peter Robinson, Dean of Derby