

The Baptism of Christ

Luke 3:15-17, 21-22

Acts 8:14-17

If you were asked the rather simple question, ‘Who are you?’, your immediate response would, of course, be ‘My name is.....’ In our security-conscious age, though, simply giving our name to someone, especially if it’s for official purposes, is simply not enough; with so many dodgy things going on, we now usually have to produce solid proof - documentary evidence - of our identity, to prove that we really *are* who we claim to be. So, if we go to our bank to carry out a transaction, we usually have to show some proof – a debit card or cheque book – to prove that we are who we say we are; gone are the days when we would be personally known to the bank manager who would themselves be able to vouch for our identity. And if a previous government had pursued their original policy, we might all, by now, be carrying around a national identity card, presumably to remind *ourselves* of who we are!

Now since last Sunday, when we celebrated the Epiphany - the visit of the wise men to the infant Jesus - we’ve fast forward three decades to the Baptism of Our Lord. And Luke’s main emphasis in his account of Christ’s Baptism is the way in which, at this precise moment, the true *identity* of Jesus is revealed. At the time of his birth, much was said about who the child born in a manger in Bethlehem *is* – ‘the Son of the Most High’, ‘the Son of God’, ‘a mighty saviour’, ‘the Messiah’, ‘the Lord’..... But now, 30 or so years down the line, as Jesus begins his public ministry, the question is raised again – ‘who really *is* he?’ It’s a question which is as relevant today as ever. For if we were to go out into Montague Street and ask folks passing by who they think Jesus is, you’re likely to get a great variety of answers – ‘he’s a good teacher who showed us how to live’, ‘he’s a great prophet’, ‘he’s the most influential person who ever lived because he changed the course of human history like no-one else has ever done’..... But most of the time, people’s assertions as to who Jesus *is*, stop well short of the *real* truth of his identity.

So, in setting forth *his* answer to the question, ‘who is Jesus?’, Luke calls upon two witnesses:

First of all, there’s John the Baptist. Remember that John had been calling Israel to repentance – to confess their sins and to turn back to God. He had been bringing about something of a national revival, and an air of expectancy had arisen that God was soon going to come among his people. So, folk naturally thought, well, maybe *John* was the one they’d been waiting for – the Messiah - the one who would inaugurate God’s reign. But John, of course, emphatically denies this. And in doing so, he demonstrates who the Messiah will be, in contrast to himself. The Messiah will be much greater than John in dignity and authority – “one who is more powerful than I is coming; I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandals.” It was common at the time for the servants of rabbis to perform various menial tasks for their teachers, but they would never actually stoop so low as to untie the thong of their sandals. So, for John to say that he’s unworthy to even do

this for the Messiah, in itself points to the fact that the Messiah will be much greater than any ordinary religious teacher. And what’s more, the Messiah will do what *John’s* Baptism and preaching only *pointed* to. John warns of the forthcoming judgement, but it’s the Messiah himself who will be the Judge – *he* will separate the wheat from the chaff. So, John reveals who Jesus will be (*his identity*) and what he will do. He will carry out God’s judgement in the power of the Holy Spirit. Remember that back in the Old Testament, part of the identity and action of *God himself* is as Judge. Now *Jesus* is taking on this same *identity* as the God of Israel.

And this testimony of John the Baptist reminds us that *we* will all one day face Jesus as *Judge*. At the time, John’s warning of the judgement to come met with varying responses. King Herod, of course, wanted to silence John by throwing him into jail. But there were many ordinary folk, from different walks of life, who actually took John’s warning seriously and accepted his baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of their sins. In the same way, as we

were reminded during the season of Advent, we too need to constantly heed that call to repent – to return to the Lord.

Then secondly, and most significantly, Jesus' *identity* is proclaimed by God the Father and the Holy Spirit. It's interesting to note that whilst today we commemorate the Baptism of Christ, in Luke's account of the event, the actual act of Baptism is presented as almost incidental to the main point being made here.

That's not to say that there isn't some significance in the fact that Jesus actually undergoes the ritual of Baptism being offered by John. In fact, it can seem rather odd why *Jesus*, who is without sin, and therefore has no need to repent, should choose to queue up alongside sinners to be baptised. But in Jesus' case, *his* Baptism is really about him numbering himself amongst sinners; he does at the beginning of his ministry what he did at the end of it on the Cross – taking our sinful identity to himself, as the friend of sinners. And his willingness to be

baptised, if that is his Father's will, marks him out as unique amongst men in his total obedience to God. So, in his baptism, Jesus shows himself to be both in solidarity with, *and* distinct from, the rest of humanity. The Son of God immerses himself in the human condition – not simply standing on the bank offering advice, but jumping into the water to save us. So, we mustn't pass over too quickly the deeper meaning behind Jesus' Baptism *itself*.

But nevertheless, for Luke, it's not the *main* point here. In fact, the text literally reads, "having been baptised and praying" – and it then moves immediately on to the main verb of the sentence – "the heaven was opened.....the Holy Spirit descended.....And a voice came from heaven." *This* is the main focus here.

So, the first thing that happens is that the *Holy Spirit* comes down visibly upon Jesus. It signifies that Jesus is the 'Anointed One' – the Messiah – anointed to do God's work and to bring about God's salvation. In our reading from the Acts of the Apostles, we find an

intriguing incident in which Peter and John are sent by the Church in Jerusalem to those Samaritans who had come to faith in Christ. They discover that these new believers had been baptised in the name of the Lord Jesus, but that they had not as yet received the Holy Spirit. So, when the apostles lay hands on them, they receive the Spirit. It's a reminder to *us* that, just as at his Baptism Our Lord was anointed with the Holy Spirit to carry out his ministry and mission, so the same Lord Jesus, now risen, exalted and glorified, in turn, pours out the same Spirit upon those who sincerely seek to follow him today.

And the second thing that happens is that the *Father* speaks – “You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.” They are words which echo two particular verses in the Old Testament. One of them is Ps 2v7 – “He said to me, ‘You are my son; today I have begotten you’”; originally the words were referring to the King of Israel (probably David), but here it speaks of the obedience of *Christ* the King to his Father's will. And the other passage is Isaiah 42v1 – “Here is my servant, whom I uphold, my *chosen*, in

whom my soul delights; I have put my *spirit* upon him; he will bring forth justice to the nations” – Jesus will indeed bring salvation to the world, *though* through his *own suffering*. Christ is both King *and* suffering Saviour.

And it's important to notice, too, in this great heavenly vision of the reality of God, the way in which all three persons of the Trinity are revealed. The *Holy Spirit* descends upon the *Son* and the *Father* speaks. When we talk of God as Trinity we're *not* in the realm of speculation. Rather, the truth is that the one true living God has actually *revealed* himself in three persons – and we see this demonstrated very clearly here, at Jesus' Baptism.

So, we're reminded today that in Jesus, we have a Saviour we can trust. And who can we really trust these days? With the constant fear of terrorist attacks, we tend to increasingly regard people with a certain degree of suspicion. Our banking and financial systems need plenty of regulation, because people can no longer be *trusted* to act in good faith.

And when it comes to politics, hopes which we might place in political leaders so often come to nothing, such that we tend to lose all *trust* in politicians. But, in the midst of all this, we have the assurance that we can indeed *trust* the Lord Jesus and his word. Because *he* comes with the highest testimonial of all – from the Father himself: “You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.” It’s often tempting in our multi-faith society to compromise on Jesus’ true *identity* – making him out to be less than he truly is. But when we are confronted with the question, ‘who is Jesus?’, we need to have confidence in the truth that he is indeed God’s chosen, anointed Son – this *is* who he is – God himself says so.

Let us pray:

Almighty God, you reveal yourself to us as Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Help to us know you in our lives and to serve you faithfully each day. Amen.