

Sermon for Online Family Service: Pott Shrigley 17th January, 2021.

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Mark 1.4-8; Matt 3.13-17 *Jesus: Baptised for us*

Originally delivered as a video, filmed in the locations described.

In Church

For reasons you know only too well it's quite a while since I baptised anyone in this font, here at St Christopher's Church.

People of all ages have been baptised here – from babies to pensioners. Usually, it begins with a request from the person – or their parents – and we talk about what it means, arrange a date, and then it takes place – often in one of our family services, like today's.

In our Bible reading, we heard about John the Baptist - who carried out the very first baptisms - and the day he received a very unexpected request for baptism.

As we read the Bible's account, the first thing we see is that baptism wasn't a quiet, comfortable, ceremony.....

Standing in the 'river'

...it was wild, challenging – disturbing, even!

People travelled miles from their towns and villages to be baptised by John in the river Jordan. He would stand in the middle of the river, waist deep himself, and, one by one, they would wade out to join him. John would plunge them down, under the water, and they would emerge dripping – though probably not cold, like me. This plunging down and then rising back up represented the new, clean life to which they were now committed: almost a picture of someone being dead, buried – and then rising again, re-born.

Remind you of anyone? Well, we'll get to that in a minute.

Walking along the river bank

So, yes, baptism was a powerful, a radical step – not just a comforting ceremony. It meant you were coming to God with your whole self; body, soul and spirit, top to toe, inside and out, all that you are and all that you have. It was a way of saying that you meant business with God.

John very clearly told all those who came to be baptised not to do it unless they meant it – unless they were ready to change, ready to stop travelling the wrong way, away from God; ready to turn around – to repent. Turn away from your sins, he said, and God will forgive you.

Sin: not a very popular word these days. But it's just as much a reality now as it was then. It basically means putting yourself first, before anyone else – including God; as the old saying goes; Sin has 'I' in the middle.

And, John said, that has to change. You need to put God at the centre of your life. Today!

Standing by the bee hives

And it wasn't just his words: there was something about John's very being – his appearance, his lifestyle – which made it clear that he himself had given his life over to God; had himself done what he was calling others to do.

He appears to have owned very little: he wore the most basic clothes – a camel hair cloak, with a simple leather belt. He ate only what he could find in the wilderness – protein-rich locusts, and sweet wild honey. He lived far away from the comforts of home – spending his time out in the wilderness where he preached and baptised.

He left people – he leaves us – in little doubt that God calls us to a radically new way of living and of being: and that that is what baptism is all about.

But it's not just turning *from*; it's turning *to*, said John. Turning to the One who is coming, to the One God is sending. I baptise with water: He will drench you in God's Holy Spirit. So make sure you are ready to welcome Him, to follow Him, to be transformed by Him.

Back in the river

So far, so good: challenging, yes; disturbing, certainly; but at least a clear message.

But now things get a bit confusing; now we come to that special day. As usual, a crowd of people are lined up on the water's edge, awaiting their turn for baptism. But, wait! The next person out, wading towards John, isthe very One he's been talking about! The One they are preparing themselves for! The One who will baptise them with the Holy Spirit. The One whom John has recently described as the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world: the One who has no sin – and is coming to help us with ours.

John for one is confused: I ought to be baptised by you – and yet you have come to me???!

Jesus answers: let it be so for now, for in this way we shall do all that God requires.

Now, this may at first seem not to make things any clearer. But in fact there is a clue here. Jesus is doing this, not for Himself, but because God, His Father, requires it.

We can make sense of this clue if we fast forward three years – from this, the very start of Jesus' ministry, to the very end. To the night before he died.

In the Garden, late evening

In the Garden of Gethsemane, the night before his crucifixion, Jesus prayed in agony, asking if He could be spared that terrible ordeal. But His prayer finished with these powerful words – yet not my will, but yours, be done. Just as at his baptism, Jesus is doing this, not because *He* wants to, but because God, His Father, requires it.

In fact, He's doing it, not for Himself, but for us – for you and me. On the cross, Jesus bore the punishment for our sin, instead of us – so that we could be forgiven.

So, Jesus ends his ministry by receiving a punishment which he doesn't deserve....

Back in the river, again

...and He starts His ministry by receiving a baptism which He doesn't need.

When John described Jesus as the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world, he couldn't possibly have foreseen that this would mean the terrible death of crucifixion.

But, perhaps, as he baptised him, he began to see just how far Jesus was willing to go for us.

So, whether you get baptised with a lot of water...

Back in church

...or with a little, the meaning is exactly the same. You are putting your faith in the one of whom God Himself said, at His baptism, this is my own dear Son, in whom I am well pleased

The One who was baptised for you. The One who died for you. The One in whom we rise to new life.