



Christ Church Cathedral

OXFORD

12 January 2020: Choral Eucharist

The First Sunday of Epiphany

Isaiah 42:1–9, Acts 10:34–43, Matthew 3:13–end

The Revd Clare Hayns, College Chaplain

Imagine you've never heard of baptism or ever seen a baptism service. It's not easy as most of us will have been to many baptism services and may even remember our own. Perhaps an Anglican sprinkling of water in a font like the one behind me; or a full body immersion in a baptistery built into the floor of the church. But imagine if you can you've never seen one and you have no idea what it is.

You go for a walk down to the newly flooded Port Meadow (or any park), and you see a group of people gathered by the edge of the water. One by one you see them take off their shoes and then their outer clothes. Perhaps they're going for a swim – wild water swimming is popular nowadays, even in January. But rather than swimming, they slowly walk into the flood waters. A rather wild looking man grabs one of them by the shoulders and throws them backwards. They go right under and for a few moments you can't see them. You're rooted to the spot. Are they drowning? Can they breathe? Should you run after them? But before you move they're pulled up again out of the water, spluttering a little and soaking wet, with bits of mud and grime on their skin.

We're so used to baptism now that it's hard to imagine how shocking it must have been to witness a baptism in the time of John the Baptist. Firstly, deep water was something unknown and to be feared, and to be willing to go into the water was in itself an act of faith. The idea of being plunged under that water would have been even more terrifying.

Today, on this second Sunday of Epiphany we remember the baptism of Christ in the river Jordan by his rather reluctant cousin John. Traditionally on this Sunday we remember our own baptisms and we have a chance to reflect on what being baptised means for us here and now, and we have an opportunity later in the service to renew those vows that we made, or that were made on our behalf, all those years ago.

But perhaps it's good to start by being a bit shocked and surprised by it once again. Firstly, the surprise that Jesus needed to be baptised. For John, baptism was about

repentance. It was a visible sign of drowning to the old life of sin and being reborn to a new life lived in preparation for the coming saviour. And so why was Jesus coming to be baptised?

Can we try to imagine how shocking it must have been for John the Baptist to find he was about to baptise his cousin Jesus? 'I need to be baptised by you, and do you come to me?' (Matthew 3.13) He is reluctant. He would have prevented Jesus. Jesus didn't need to repent of any sins because he was without sin; He was fully Divine. But the remarkable and unique thing about the Christian faith is that, through Jesus we believe that God became fully human: 'The Word became flesh and lived amongst us' (John 1.14)

Until the birth of Jesus, God, who created us and gave us life, could not experience what it was to **be** us. How could he? He could not know what it was like to be born to struggling parents, what it was like to live in exile, to know what it is to experience the gamut of human emotions, joy, desire, pain, grief. God could not know what it was to live with a failing human body, to experience the pain of betrayal and the uncertainty of death. Why was Jesus baptised?

As a sign that through Jesus, God is totally immersed with humanity and in humanity. Jesus, fully divine and yet fully human, entered into the depths of the experience of humanity in its entirety. Perhaps we can let that surprise and shock us once again.

Through Jesus, God himself walked out into the uncertain waters. He would have stripped off his outer layers, would have felt the mud between his toes and the cold air on his body. He would have felt John's hand on his shoulders and on his forehead and had to trust him as he pushes him backwards and under the water. Once under all sounds of the shore would have muffled as his ears filled with water and his lungs restricted. And then he would have come up again into the air to take a breath. And as he comes up Jesus hears the voice of his Father: 'This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased' (Matthew 3. 13-end) The voice which echoes the servant song from Isaiah: 'Here is my servant, whom I uphold, my chosen, in whom my soul delights' (Isaiah 42. 1)

In this moment of the baptism of Christ, God the Father, God the Son, God the Holy Spirit are visible, audible and present: through Jesus, the voice from heaven, the dove of the Holy Spirit. In this moment the heavenly and earthly, the divine and the human come together. Perhaps we can let that surprise and shock us once again.

The newly baptised Jesus rises up from the depths of water with these words of affirmation ringing in his ears, and is immediately propelled into the desert where he

faces temptation and trial, and then enters into the depths of human suffering and pain, which ultimately lead to his own death on the cross.

Jesus did not just come to be baptised and to be fully immersed in the depths of human experience for himself; for some exercise in understanding humanity. No, he also came to baptise us with his Spirit so that we too can be fully immersed in God's divine love. So that we can be fully immersed into life in all its fullness.

Rowan William, in a brilliant chapter on baptism in 'Being Christian' says: "baptism means being with Jesus 'in the depths': the depths of human need, including the depths of our own selves in their need – but also in the depths of God's love; in the depths where the Spirit is re-creating and refreshing human life as God meant it to be."ⁱ He continues... "Perhaps baptism really ought to have some health warnings attached to it: 'If you take this step, if you go into these depths, it will be transfiguring, exhilarating, life-giving and very, very dangerous.'ⁱⁱ What might 'being with Jesus in the depths' look like for each one of us?

Imagine we're now back at the waters' edge having watched those others go forward to be baptised by John, and having witnessed Jesus' baptism. Now imagine Jesus, having come up out of the water, turns to us. He looks straight at us and invites us to step forward. Perhaps that makes us feel uncomfortable?

We might feel more at home on the shore on in the shallows, dabbling our toes into the waters of faith occasionally. Entering into the depths might involve taking off some outer layers, layers that protect us: our pride; our commitment to being independent; our fear of the unknown. The step towards Jesus might mean letting go of ways of life that no longer bring us joy. The step might involve repentance for sins that weigh us down.

Imagine we step forward, we take off those layers and allow Jesus to immerse us. And as we go down into the water all that weighs us down is washed away, cleansed, purified. And we come up, coughing and spluttering but renewed, forgiven, able to breathe freely for the first time in ages. And we hear the voice of our heavenly father say to us: 'this is my son/daughter, my beloved. With them I am well pleased'.

Baptism isn't just something that happened once many years ago which has no bearing on our lives today. Martin Luther speaks of the Christian life being 'nothing else than a daily baptism once begun and ever to be continued'.ⁱⁱⁱ The Christian life is one of continually living out our baptism calling and in a moment we will have a chance to renew our baptism vows and perhaps it is a chance to remember God's call on our lives.

The call to live in the depths. In the depths of our own need for repentance and change; in the depths of the needs of our world with all its pain and struggle; and into the depths of God's transforming love; a love that calls us his beloved children; and into the deep joy of life in all its creative, messy, glorious fullness. Perhaps we can let that surprise and shock us once again.

ⁱ Rowan Williams, *Being Christian*, SPCK, page 5

ⁱⁱ Rowan Williams, *Being Christian*, SPCK, page 9

ⁱⁱⁱ Martin Luther, *The Large Catechism*, XIII A, 'On Infant Baptism'