



Revd Ro's Reflection on the  
Baptism of Christ  
The First Sunday after Epiphany  
2022 Year C

Acts 8. 14-17

Luke 3. 15-17, 21, 22

Many of you will have watched Carols from Kings on Christmas Eve, mum and I always do. There behind the high altar is a beautiful painting. It is Ruben's Adoration of the Magi. The feast of Epiphany was on 6th. It is of course the coming of the Magi to the Christ Child. These men are Gentiles; Christ came for all peoples so it is wonderful that they are there to worship him. I have dealt with Epiphany in depth in Year B so I am concentrating on the readings for the Baptism of Christ.

Over the past few weeks, certainly during Advent, John the Baptist has been central to our readings so I will only refer to one or two points here. Since my ordination I have conducted lots of baptisms. I clearly remember the first; the congregation were very concerned that I would drop him, 'not having had much experience of babies.' Needless to say all was well and I found it profoundly moving.

I have not performed many adult baptisms however. It is lovely though when a parent is baptised with the child, adopting Christianity in their own words whereas of course the child cannot.

Here is John the Baptist with a definite commission,

'See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you,  
who will prepare your way;

<sup>3</sup> the voice of one crying out in the wilderness:

"Prepare the way of the Lord,  
make his paths straight" ', (Mark 1.1-3)

He is well aware of his purpose as the 'herald of good tidings', he is the 'prophet of the most high.' He is the one who will make ready the people for the Messiah. John was different. He does not seek to conform to peoples' wishes. He tells it like it is, at one point addressing them as, 'You vipers brood.' For John time is short, in the section that is missed from our gospel reading it says,

<sup>18</sup> 'So, with many other exhortations, he proclaimed the good news to the people. <sup>19</sup>But Herod the ruler, who had been rebuked by him because of Herodias, his brother's wife, and because of all the evil things that Herod had done, <sup>20</sup>added to them all by shutting up John in prison.'

John is God's workman. He is fearless. He knows what is right. Herod the Great is dead, his son Herod is ruling but he has married his brother Philip's wife after her divorce. It is breaking Jewish law, an anathema to John and he fearlessly speaks out and pays the price. He dies a martyr's death.

Here he stands now on the banks of the River Jordan, the river the people of Israel crossed to enter their land. People ask him what they must do – the answer is simple but it means their lives must change.

'Whoever has two coats must share with anyone who has none; and whoever has food must do likewise.' <sup>12</sup>Even tax-collectors came to be baptised, and they asked him, 'Teacher, what should we do?' <sup>13</sup>He said to them, 'Collect no more than the amount prescribed for you.' <sup>14</sup>Soldiers also asked him, 'And we, what should we do?' He said to them, 'Do not extort money from anyone by threats or false accusation, and be satisfied with your wages.'

Now is the time to repent, to turn from sin and be baptised. John is baptising by the Jordan and he is waiting for the one who is to come. It is natural for the people to suspect that this young prophet might be something more.

<sup>15</sup> 'As the people were filled with expectation, and all were questioning in their hearts concerning John, whether he might be the Messiah,' John knows that he is not, he knows his role clearly. As it says in St. John's gospel,

<sup>6</sup> 'There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. <sup>7</sup>He came as a witness to testify to the light, so that all might believe through him. <sup>8</sup>He himself was not the light, but he came to testify to the light. <sup>9</sup>The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world.'

John's answer is unequivocal; he knows what his mission is, to tell the people of the coming of their long awaited King, the Messiah.

<sup>16</sup> 'John answered all of them by saying, 'I baptise you with water; but one who is more powerful than I is coming; I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandals. He will baptise you with the Holy Spirit and fire.'

The one who is to come has been with God from the beginning we think back to the beginning of St. John's gospel.

<sup>1</sup> 'In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. <sup>2</sup>He was in the beginning with God. <sup>3</sup>All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being.'

St. John is telling of the coming of God incarnate. He understands the wonder of God's coming.

The baptism of John and Jesus is so different; John's baptism for repentance is with water. It symbolically washes sin away. Jesus is divine, when Jesus lays hands on anyone he imparts the Holy Spirit. Always Jesus prays, calls on his Father as he acts for and through Him. The power of the Spirit is within him and given as he lays hands on people in God's name. They are transformed in body, mind and spirit.

The people are with John at the river's edge,

<sup>21</sup> 'Now when all the people were baptised, and when Jesus also had been baptised and was praying, the heaven was opened, <sup>22</sup>and the Holy Spirit descended upon him in bodily form like a dove. And a voice came from heaven, 'You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.'

It is after the people have been baptised that Jesus receives baptism from John, though John feels unworthy. What happens then is vitally important. The Holy Spirit descends upon Jesus; a voice from heaven affirms him as God's Son. The Spirit strengthens him with the power of God. It is after this that Jesus goes to the wilderness. That is important. God is with his Son as he faces the trials to come.

It is wonderful to think that as a baptism takes place the same Holy Spirit is present now as then.

It is the power of the Holy Spirit that links our two readings today. Chapter eight of the Acts of the Apostles begins immediately after the martyrdom of Stephen. We remember that those who killed him laid their coats at the feet of Saul and we are told, <sup>8.1</sup>'And Saul approved of their killing him.' More than this,

'That day a severe persecution began against the church in Jerusalem, and all except the apostles were scattered throughout the countryside of Judea and Samaria. <sup>2</sup> Devout men buried Stephen and made loud lamentation over him. <sup>3</sup>But Saul was ravaging the church by entering house after house; dragging off both men and women, he committed them to prison.'

It is amazing to think that this is Paul, the apostle to the Gentiles, the man who fearlessly teaches of King Jesus and dies for him. Jesus turned Paul's life upside down! For now though Saul is causing havoc. The church is in turmoil, persecution is rampant and Saul is the ringleader. The Apostles remain in Jerusalem but many leave. One such is Philip, one of the six men appointed a deacon. He leaves but he is not silenced. He goes to Samaria of all places. We know about Jews and Samaritans – long-time enemies – but Philip chooses them. He is obeying Jesus' command of which Luke writes at the beginning of Acts.

<sup>1.6</sup> 'So when they had come together, they asked him, 'Lord, is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?' <sup>7</sup>He replied, 'It is not for you to know the times or periods that the Father has set by his own authority. <sup>8</sup>But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.'

Notice this. His followers have received the Holy Spirit, they are strengthened with the power of God and they go out in Jesus' name, Philip was successful in Samaria and many people accepted Jesus because of Philip's missionary work. He is able to perform works of power in Jesus' name.

<sup>8,6</sup> 'The crowds with one accord listened eagerly to what was said by Philip, hearing and seeing the signs that he did, <sup>7</sup>for unclean spirits, crying with loud shrieks, came out of many who were possessed; and many others who were paralysed or lame were cured. <sup>8</sup>So there was great joy in that city.'

Philip does not only do great acts of healing but he baptises these new Christians. The central thing is lacking however. These people are baptised with water but the Apostles know that they must send some of their number to them. John and Peter go to them; they confirm their acceptance of Jesus by the laying on of hands.

<sup>15</sup> 'The two went down and prayed for them that they might receive the Holy Spirit <sup>16</sup>(for as yet the Spirit had not come upon any of them; they had only been baptised in the name of the Lord Jesus).'

Peter and John lay hands on them in the name of Jesus and confer on them the Holy Spirit. <sup>17</sup>'Then Peter and John laid their hands on them, and they received the Holy Spirit.'

This receiving of the Holy Spirit is central; Jesus had promised to send the Comforter to his disciples, his first followers receive the power from on high at that first Pentecost. The Apostles pass on that Spirit through the laying on of hands, not through their own power but through the power of God working through them.

Today at the laying on of hands the Holy Spirit is called down upon a person. The Bishop will lay hands on a candidate at confirmation and ordination, but there are many other occasions and whenever that happens we call down the power of the Holy Spirit upon the person who is being ministered to.

It is a profound and holy moment. Many people will tell of how their lives have been changed by it. No one who lays hands on a person acts without authorisation, just as the Apostles did. They obeyed Jesus' command, so do we. We do not act of ourselves but God acts through us.

A priest calls down the Holy Spirit in the communion and we receive Christ's body and blood. The Holy Spirit strengthens us just as it strengthened Jesus. The Holy Spirit of God transforms us. We remember that God is with us always and whenever we call to him in prayer he is as close as our own breathing.

*'Be still for the Presence of the Lord, the Holy One is here.'* David J Evans

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