

Now may I speak in the name of God, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

The gospel set for the Sunday after Epiphany is always an account of Jesus' baptism. And it's a story that's in all the gospels. Today we've heard Matthew's versions, all the versions have their slight differences, but three things are common to them all. Firstly, that Jesus is baptized in the River Jordan by John. Secondly, the Father recognizes Jesus as his beloved son, and thirdly, the Holy Spirit prepares him for his mission of service. So I want to say something about each of these three elements.

In the verses preceding the passage that we've just heard, we're told of John the Baptist, and his message is a simple, uncompromising message: repent for the kingdom of heaven is near. And the people responded. We're told they came to John confessing their sins, they were baptized by him in the River Jordan. And then we get to the verse where our passage begins that I just read. It says, "Then Jesus came from Galilee to the Jordan to be baptized by John." Which begs the question, why did Jesus join the queue of those waiting to be baptized by John the Baptist? If John's baptism was a baptism of repentance for sins and we understand Jesus to be sinless, why did he need to be baptized?

That's a serious question. It's something that the gospel writer Matthew was clearly aware of because he inserts a conversation in his account of the baptism, which isn't in the other gospels, a conversation between John the Baptist and Jesus, where this very matter is raised. He makes it clear that John was not comfortable at all with the idea of baptizing Jesus. He tried to deter him saying, "It's me who needs to be baptized by you." To which Jesus replies with one of the most enigmatic sentences in the whole gospel, "Let it be so now, it is proper for us to do this, to fulfill all righteousness." I read several commentaries this week on that verse that it's quite clear that nobody has the slightest idea what that means. So I'm not even going to speculate. But one thing everybody does agree on, one thing that is clear, it's that Jesus begins his public ministry by being baptized in this way because he's looking to identify with those he has come to serve and to save.

Jesus participated in this movement of conversion and repentance, not because he needed it, but because it aligns himself with those around him. It's an act of solidarity, a human act from the son of God. It's not about Jesus' sin, it's about Jesus identifying himself with those marred by sin. This is God in Christ immersing himself, literally immersing himself in this case, in our humanity. At his baptism, Jesus is taking sides with us, his people.

Theologians often talk about Jesus taking on the sin of humanity. It's a bit like what parents feel when their child is guilty of something criminal. There's no sin on the parent's part, but they feel the weight of the suffering caused by their child. Jesus takes on the sin and the burden of the world. And Karl Barth, the great theologian, said that perhaps no one was in greater need of baptism than Jesus because of this way he takes on the sin of the world.

The second common feature in the story is the heavenly voice proclaiming "this is my son, the beloved, with whom I am well pleased." And these words echo the Old Testament passage that we heard read from the Prophet Isaiah Chapter 42. And that's one of the famous servant songs in that book, a collection of songs which speak of a coming, a particular servant who we identify as Jesus the Messiah. And that servant song begins, "Here is my servant whom I uphold, my chosen in whom my soul delights." And the translation there could just as easily be "with whom I am well pleased." That's the verse that's being picked up in the baptism story. And the servant songs depict someone who is called to suffer. And the most famous servant song is Isaiah 53 that we hear each Good Friday. You'll be familiar with these words. "He was despised and rejected by men, a man of sorrows familiar with suffering. Surely he took our infirmities and carried our sorrows. He was pierced for our transgressions."

The Father's voice right at the beginning of Jesus' ministry identifies Jesus as his son and also speaks of his mission and his calling. Jesus knew who he was and what he was called to do. To put it in today's language, he had a strong sense of his own identity. Now we hear a lot about identity now and strangely, we seem to be getting less and less comfortable, unsure of who we are. How would you answer the question, who are you? Might be said that a strong sense of identity begins with hearing these words. "This is my child whom I love, with whom I am well pleased."

We may not have heard those words from an earthly parent, but we do hear them from our heavenly Father. Remember what I was saying about Jesus identifying with his people. What that means is that we can become one with him. In our baptism, we are baptized into Christ Jesus. In the language of Saint Paul, we are adopted into God's family. Paul writes this, "But when the fullness of time had come, God sent his son born of a woman, born under the law in order to redeem those who were under the law so that we might receive adoption as children. And because you are children of God, God has sent the spirit of his son into our hearts crying Abba, Father so you are no longer a

slave, but a child. And if a child then also an heir through God."

What we see in the baptism of Jesus is a glimpse into the nature of God, as if the veil of heaven is pulled back. We have the Father addressing the Son and the descent of the Holy Spirit. Three persons of God interacting. It's a glimpse into the divine and it's also an invitation. We're invited to share in this circle of love. The mission of Jesus, which begins at his baptism, is that we might be brought into this fellowship of love, which is God. We too can hear these words. "This is my beloved child in whom I am well pleased." And we too can reply by calling God, "Abba, Father." That's the invitation.

Remember what we'll be praying later in the words of the prayer that Jesus himself taught us. He invited us to begin our prayer, by what? By saying "Father, Abba." A joy in that relationship with his heavenly Father that we see in his baptism, he enjoined. We are called into that fellowship, that circle of divine love. We should never take that privilege for granted of addressing God as Father. They remind us of the amazing truth that we are the adopted children of God, that Jesus is our brother, we share in his sonship. That's the privilege of our baptism. He has identified with us, so that we can identify with him.

And I'll close by saying a few words about the spirit who features in all the stories of Jesus's baptism, this center of the spirit on Jesus as a dove or like a dove. It's the spirit who prepares Jesus for the mission of service. Remember when Jesus goes to the temple and he reads from Isaiah the words that we've heard, "The spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor and freedom for the prisoners and release to the oppressed." The spirit of the Lord was upon him to equip him for that mission and that task. Just before Jesus comes for baptism by John, we read of John talking of the limitations of his baptism. He says, "I baptize with water as a sign of repentance, but someone is coming after me more powerful than me who will baptize with the Holy Spirit and with fire." John the Baptist recognized the limitations of what he was doing. He knew his baptism didn't have the power to change. The baptism that Jesus offered with the promise of the spirit had the power to change, the power to equip his people for ministry, mission and service. That's our inheritance, the gift we're offered, but a gift we don't always use.

There's a story of a new missionary, Herbert Jackson, who was on a posting overseas and he was given a car along with his house and the car wouldn't start without a push. It was all right once it got going. But it was hard to start in the first place. So he devised a plan, so he'd get in the

driver's seat and his wife would push the car, get it started, go down the hill, and they'd be away. And when he went round making his calls in the day, he worked out a system and a scheme where he'd only ever park on hills going down, or leave the car running throughout the day. And after a couple of years, he was replaced in this posting and a new person came and he showed him around the house and he showed him the car and he said, "Well, the thing about the car is, you've got to push it and then keep it running all day because you can't turn it off and on."

So the new person just lifted up the hood and said, "Well, all that's wrong here is this cord needs connecting." So he connected the cord and the car ran perfectly. And Mr. Jackson, the missionary, learnt a lesson that he spoke on and the lesson was he'd spent all this time devising a strategy to cope with the fact that the car didn't stop. He didn't actually fix the problem. He'd worked out how to do it on his own. Which is something about what we can do with God and his Spirit. The Holy Spirit, which is offered to all God's people, as a power and a dynamic to change. But somehow we could always prefer the way, the strategies we have for coping on our own. But in this new year, let us resolve to be open to God, to draw on His power, to lead into the power of the Spirit, not to do things with our own clever plans or under our own steam, but to draw on the power of the Spirit, to lead us and equip us and take us into new directions that we might not have explored before.

Let's look this year to live in the power of the Spirit, to let go of the ways that we found to do things under our own steam. Let's allow God to take control, let go and let God as they say. So remember the common elements in all the stories of Jesus's baptism. Jesus is baptized in the River Jordan by John, the Father recognized him as his beloved Son, and the Holy Spirit equips him for mission. And remember also that we too, who are baptized, are adopted as God's children, and we too are equipped for mission and service by the Holy Spirit. Amen.