

After the excitement of the Christmas story – the build up as Mary hears her “news”, the trip to Bethlehem, the stable, the birth of Jesus, the angels and shepherds, the wise men - the whole story of Jesus moves forward in leaps and bounds in Luke's telling of it, and in today's gospel reading we cover the end of the mission of John the Baptist, and the Baptism of Jesus

We heard one of John the Baptist's most famous lines, “I baptise you with water; but one who is more powerful than I is coming. He will baptise you with the Holy Spirit.”

John was quite sure that he himself was only the forerunner. The king was still to come and with him would come judgement. The winnowing fork he referred to was a great flat wooden shovel. With it the grain was tossed into the air: the heavy grain fell to the ground and the chaff was blown away and just as the chaff was separated from the grain so the king would separate the good and bad. So John painted a picture of judgement, but it was a judgement that someone could meet with confidence if they had discharged their duty to their neighbour and if they had faithfully done their day's work.

I said we came to the end of the mission of John the Baptist – and this all happens in those few verses of Luke which are missed out from the gospel reading: “So, with many other exhortations, he proclaimed the good news to the people. 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, added to them all by shutting up John in prison.” And eventually Herod, at the instigation of Herodias, ordered John to be beheaded.

We now move on to the baptism of Jesus and straight away there is a question that we need to think about: “Wasn't it a bit odd that Jesus was baptised by John the Baptist – and not the other way around. John clearly thought so as we are told in Matthew's gospel, from the Message “Jesus then appeared, arriving at the Jordan river from Galilee. He wanted John to baptise him. John objected, “I'm the one who needs to be baptised, not you!” But Jesus insisted. “Do it. God's work, putting things right all these centuries, is coming together right now in this baptism.” So John did it.”

So why do many people have a problem with all this? Well, the baptism of John was a baptism of repentance and it is our conviction that Jesus was without sin. Why then did he offer himself for this baptism? In the early church it was sometimes suggested, with a rather sweet touch, that he did it to please Mary, his mother, who simply thought it would be a nice thing to do – but surely we need a better answer than that.

In the life of every person there are certain definite stages, certain key moments on which their whole life turns. It was so with Jesus and every now and again we must stop and try and see his life as a whole. The first key moment was the visit to the Temple when he was twelve, when he discovered his unique relationship with God (the question he asked his parents after they had been searching for him - did you not know I would be in my Father's house?).

By the time of the emergence of John, Jesus was about thirty. That is to say at least eighteen years had passed. All through these years he must have been realizing more and more his own uniqueness. But still he remained the village carpenter of Nazareth. He must have known that a day must come when he must say goodbye to Nazareth and go out upon his larger task. He must have waited for some sign – for his next key moment.

When John emerged the people flocked to hear him and to be baptized. Throughout the whole country there was an unprecedented move towards God. And Jesus knew that his hour had struck. It was not that he was conscious of sin and of the need of repentance. It was that he knew that he too must identify himself with this movement towards God. For Jesus the emergence of John was God's call to action; and his first step was to identify himself with the people in their search for God.

But in Jesus' baptism something happened. Before he could take this tremendous step he had to be sure that he was right; and in the key moment of baptism, God spoke to him. Make no mistake, what happened in the baptism was an experience personal to Jesus. The voice of God came to him and told him he had taken the right decision. But more, far more – that very same voice mapped out all his course for him.

God said, "You are my Son whom I love; with you I am well pleased." The key thing about Jesus that we have to keep on reminding ourselves – as it is so important – is that Jesus was fully divine – fully God – but he was also fully human. Those first thirty years of his life were therefore really important. When we think back to the first thirty years or so of our lives there is so much that we learned about ourselves, who we are, what we can and cannot do, and, to a certain extent at least, who we are meant to be. And this is what Jesus, as a fully human person, also had to discover, and what God is saying to him here, during his baptism, is that he has got it right.

There were other consequences of all this that are being confirmed to Jesus at this key moment by his Father: he, Jesus, is the Messiah, so that everything that was prophesied in the scriptures, what we now call the Old Testament, that would happen to the Messiah would happen to him – so it was not just identifying himself as the Messiah, God's anointed king, but the acceptance of what that meant for him – this fully human person. It was not going to bring him power and glory, but suffering and a cross. What this key moment in Jesus' life is telling us is that the cross did not come on Jesus unawares; from the first moment of realization of who he was he saw it ahead. The baptism shows us Jesus asking for God's approval and receiving the destiny of the cross.

I wonder if you, looking backwards, can see such key moments in your life? Some people can identify the day, and perhaps even the time, when they gave their life to Christ – when they became fully signed up Christians, whereas for others it has been a much more gradual process. I often say that I was born into the church; both my parents were committed members of our local parish church in Northampton, and the church was always a huge part of our family's life. Even when I spent several years not wanting to have anything to do with the church, my mother ensured that I could not allow it to be too far away from me. And rather than key moments on a certain day or time, I can recognise key periods in my life when my faith really developed: when I became hugely involved in the United Reformed Church's National Youth Centre which opened my eyes to different ways of worshipping; when I was church secretary of our church during a three year interregnum which showed me the importance of pastoral care of the members of your church; my whole discernment process before ordination – that time when both the church and Kate and I had to decide whether ordained ministry was really what I was being called to showed me so much about how churches are run, how they can be run, how they should be run, and what I should and should not be doing as a priest leading a church; and now my curacy is showing me all sorts of very practical things and I have learned lots from Angela and others, and during each of these periods I have seen my faith grow, my love for and my reliance on God grow.

But at this point I feel that I and we have questions that we don't know the answers to and that feeling is driven by one key question. What is this very strange period in our lives really showing us in terms of what God wants us to be doing individually and in our church? One thing I feel very strongly is that this is a key moment in the development of our churches.

The truth is that we are being forced to change by what is happening to the world. We have lived in this pandemic for about two years now and, without wishing in any way to depress anyone, we have no idea how much longer it will go on. But our churches have changed – we have tried to keep going with a mixture of in person worship and online worship and even sound only worship via audio cd's. We have kept our meetings going using this strange thing called Zoom as a way of meeting. But that is what we

have been trying to do – keep going – and now we have surely reached the time when that is not enough. I believe this is a key moment in the life of the church in this country – and more particularly to us in this Benefice. Angela has started conversations at Benefice and Parish level to get us to think about where we need to go – but in order to go anywhere as a group, we each need to be ready to play our part. Angela led a communion service at Thriplow school on Thursday and she was talking to the children about journeys and how they need to prepare themselves – they need to pack some food and drink, they may need to pack some clothes, they need to know where they are going, and they need to know the route.

We are on a journey. We need our food and drink. Later in this service we will be receiving just that. As we take communion today, let's ask God to feed us as we prepare to go on this journey. We need to pack some clothes – those clothes come in the form of our bibles and our prayer time with Jesus, those things that give me, and I hope you, the warmth and protection I need on my journey with God. The other two requirements are a bit trickier – where are we going and how do we plan a route without knowing where we are going? We know what we want to find – revival in our churches; more people coming to know and to love and to serve the Lord, and growth in our own discipleship. How we achieve that, what our destination is, that is what we as churches need to discover over the coming months, and all I ask you today is to be prepared to join us on that journey – even if there is a risk that the final destination is not exactly where you were expecting.

Returning to Jesus' baptism, the journey which was given to him to take was very much defined – it required the ultimate sacrifice by him for us. By comparison, surely any journey of ours, whilst being much less certain, is also an easier one to take?

Shall we pray.

Heavenly Father, we all want to know and love and serve you more and more each day, but life for our churches is not easy at the moment. Will you guide us as to where we should go on our journey, as your church. Help us to remember that whilst we love to feel a sense of ownership of each of the churches in this Benefice, they are your churches, they are there to meet your purposes, they are there to guide people to you. We thank you for your Son Jesus, for his baptism and all that taught us, and we pray that we may follow his lead in everything we do, in your name, Amen.