

## THE BAPTISM OF OUR LORD, 09-01-2022 *The Reverend Lorna Green*

Isaiah 43:1-7; Psalm 29; Acts 8:14-17;

### **Luke 3.15-22**

*As the people were filled with expectation, and all were questioning in their hearts concerning John, whether he might be the Messiah, John answered all of them by saying, 'I baptize 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 baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. His winnowing-fork is in his hand, to clear his threshing-floor and to gather the wheat into his granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire.' 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. Now when all the people were baptized, and when Jesus also had been baptized and was praying, the heaven was opened, 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.*

Why was Jesus baptised? Why is anyone baptised- what is it for?

The usual answer is that baptism is about forgiveness- we are baptised so that our sins can be forgiven, and we can join God's family.

But wasn't Jesus without sin? And what about tiny babies; we baptise them before they've had time to commit anything like a sin!

Is baptism about the Holy Spirit? Are we baptised so that we can be filled with God's Spirit? But then as the second person of the Trinity, surely Jesus didn't need to be filled with the Spirit.

Anyway there are stories in the New Testament of people being filled with the Spirit before they were baptised. In the short reading from the Acts of the Apostles we heard today, some people in Samaria were baptised and only received the gift of the Spirit later, when Peter and John visited and explained it to them. Maybe we have got things a bit mixed up in our understanding of the connection between baptism and forgiveness. Baptism is about forgiveness, and we need forgiveness; but baptism is also about relationship, our relationship with God. In baptism we are named and claimed as children of God.

We tend to think of forgiveness as a mechanism- the means by which we become children of God; but forgiveness is not the means, rather it is the result. It is the gift of God.

In other words, God doesn't forgive us so that we can become God's children: we already ARE God's children. Forgiveness is a result of God's love for us, not a condition of God's love.

Baptism and forgiveness can be confusing for us, and we can confuse other instances of gift and means or mechanism. The Ten Commandments and the Law, for example. We tend to think that God gave the people of Israel the commandments so they could improve their behaviour and live as God wanted them to, and then they could become God's people.

But God makes the promise or covenant with Israel first- you can read about it in the book of Exodus- and Israel accepts the promise. THEN the Law is given to them. The Commandments are a gift, not a mechanism. God did not love the people of Israel because they kept the Law: God gave them the Law because they were God's people already, and the Law would help them to live. (They kept messing it up, but that's another story)

So far, then, we can see that we might confuse gift and mechanism in terms of baptism and forgiveness and the Law. Perhaps the most significant confusion occurs when we think about the Cross, and what it means.

For many years, the dominant understanding of the Cross in the Western Church explained it like this: We are sinners; therefore, we deserve punishment.

Jesus is sinless and doesn't deserve punishment.

Jesus suffers in our place, as our substitute, on the cross.

Therefore, Jesus' death on the cross is necessary for God to forgive us.

This is what I learnt, and probably many or most of you too, when I first started trying to understand who Jesus was. We hear it in some of the hymns we sing, and in parts of the prayer book. It makes sense, it seems logical, simple, and straightforward. But is it really?

If Jesus had to die so we could be forgiven, why or how did he forgive people during his earthly life- before he died? And how is it forgiveness is somebody else takes your punishment, or pays your debt? If I don't pay my mortgage and someone pays it for me, the bank hasn't forgiven me- it just found someone else to pay.

So maybe it isn't the cross that makes it possible for God to forgive us. Maybe the cross is what happens because God already loves us and forgives us. God in Jesus comes to offer us forgiveness out of love- and humanity killed Jesus rather than admit that we need forgiveness and love.

The Cross demonstrates the futility of hatred and violence, and the nature of unconditional love that will always triumph in the end.

If we go back to the Baptism of our Lord, we can say- yes, baptism is about forgiveness- and it is about so much more!

It's about love, identity, affirmation, commitment, promise, and more. In baptism God's great love for us is proclaimed as we are called, named, and claimed as God's beloved children; we are given the Holy Spirit; and God promises to renew, restore, and forgive us always.

When Jesus was baptised he heard God say, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased." When we are baptised, God says to us, "You are my child, and I love you, and I am pleased with you." We are given an identity and a name as a child of God. We are assured that God loves us- just as we are. God claims us as God's own and promises to forgive us whenever we ask.

Maybe we shouldn't be surprised that Jesus was baptised like us; maybe we should be astonished that we are baptised like him! God says the same words to us at our baptism that Jesus heard at his.

Jesus became one of us so that we might become like him. Let that sink in for a moment.

God knows we are frail, wilful, self-centred, silly creatures, and some of us are deliberately wicked. Even so, God's love is always offered and never withheld, and our job is to spread the news, share the love, and work with God to make God's dream for the world come true.

The late Archbishop Desmond Tutu said this: *"I would like to share with you two simple truths: there is nothing that cannot be forgiven, and there is no one undeserving of forgiveness."*

Jesus didn't need to be forgiven and he didn't need to be baptised; he chose to go to John and be baptised in the River Jordan, to be one with us. May we choose, every day, to be more like him.

The Lord be with you.