

The Baptism of Christ
St Thomas', Salisbury, 2021

Is 43: 1-7

Acts 8: 14-17

Luke 3: 15-17, 21, 22

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.
Amen.

I guess today is probably the last day on which I can reasonably wish you all a happy Christmas. So, happy Christmas!

The rhythm of our daily and weekly worship falls largely into three big sections. The Easter cycle, which begins on Ash Wednesday and runs all the way until the sun-drenched early summer days of Pentecost. The ordinary time of the year. And then the Christmas cycle in which we currently are. And the Christmas cycle itself is split into three sections. The first is Advent. The second are the 12 days of Christmas themselves, and the third is where we currently find ourselves, the days after we remember the visit of the wise men, the Magi, these days which run through the whole of January all the way up to the great feast of Candlemas at the very beginning of February.

And these two big cycles, the Easter cycle and the Christmas cycle, tell us the story of the two great theological truths that define us as Christian people. The Christmas cycle is all about incarnation. God comes to earth. God becomes human. And because God comes to earth, because God becomes human, we share in God. If you want to boil Christianity down to just two statements, that is the first. God comes to us. That is the story we have been telling since Advent Sunday, and it is the story we are telling now. And then from Ash Wednesday onwards all the

way through until summer we tell the second truth. God saves us. The Easter cycle is about salvation. Or redemption. In the manger God comes to us. On the cross and in the garden God saves us.

Everything I've said is true. Everything I've said is also, of course, hugely oversimplified. Every day, in every act of worship, we actually tell both of those truths. Because they are absolutely intertwined. God comes to us because God is redeeming us. God is redeeming us because God is with us.

And today is the feast of the Baptism of Christ. One of the three stories in Scripture which the church has always told in January. Last week the story of the visit of the wise men. Next Sunday the story of water made wine at the wedding at Cana. And today Jesus' own baptism. Look back through the history of worship in the Western church and we find these three stories being read during this month way back at least into the mediaeval period. Why? Because in these stories we find the next part of wonder of Christmas. As we gaze into the crib, as we continue to do this month, more and more wonder and glory and truth is revealed. We are overwhelmed by the mystery. And these three stories begin to build up in us in understanding of what it is that Christ is doing in our lives. They are all stories about revelation. The word Epiphany means revelation. Or showing. Or sign. And that word comes up again and again in the readings of this season.

Jesus comes to be baptised. In this service, each year, we are reminded of our identity. Our identity in Christ. The word Christian of course means 'person of Christ': Christ-ian. And we wonder what that might mean. Well I want to suggest to you that all the way through this month we see echoes of the Easter cycle breaking through. We begin to see how the baby in the manger is connected to the man on the cross. And how we are intimately

related to both. Today is a bookend if you like, which finds its twin later on the year. Everything is connected. Everything is related.

I think there are three vital aspects of our identity in the readings this morning: water, the name, and the Holy Spirit. Jesus is baptised in water. And so we are baptised in water as well. When I finish preaching we are going to do something different this morning. Our attention will turn to the font. The ministers will move there, and you will be invited to stand if you able to, and to turn yourself towards the font. We will do something as the church today: we will focus our attention on the water, and the water will remind us of the story of which we are part. The prayer of blessing over the water in the font is rich with biblical imagery. We will remember creation. We will remember the forgiveness of sins. We will remember our becoming children of God. And still facing the font we will repent of our sins, and dedicate ourselves to the task of being Christ's people. We will associate ourselves with Christ's baptism, by remembering our own.

Then as we turn back to the altar and sing the offertory hymn water will be dipped from the font and placed in front of the crib. And I simply invite you, the end of the service, if you would like to, spend a short period in front of the crib, and dip your own hand into that water. Feel your own baptism, see how it is connected to the baptism of the baby you see before you. Feel your faith reaching out to the child, as the arms of Mary and Joseph, of the shepherds and the Magi reach out to him.

Water. Christ is baptised in it, and so are we. Secondly the name. Here in the account of the baptism of Christ that voice from heaven says, "you are my Son, the beloved." Christ is identified. So are you. What do we say to every person you

comes for baptism? 'Kelvin, Ali, Emma, God has called you by name and made you his own.' God knows who we are. God knows who you are. And you are children, and beloved. We heard that in our first reading didn't we? 'Do not fear for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are mine. You are precious in my sight and honoured, and I love you.' Our redemption, our salvation, which we will celebrate at Easter is personal, because the incarnation is personal. God comes down to us at Christmas, and he stays with us through Easter and out into eternity.

Water, and the name. And then thirdly the Holy Spirit. The second reading is one of the most curious in Scripture. People write about it. A lot. What can it mean to have not receive the Holy Spirit, but only being baptised in the name of the Lord Jesus? We don't know. It is perplexing. But what is absolutely clear in this reading, and actually from the gospel reading as well, is that our identity as Christians is that the Holy Spirit dwells in us. At a baptism, after telling the candidate God has called them by name, and after immersing them in the water, the very next thing that happens is an invocation of the Holy Spirit. What liturgists refer to as an epiclesis. The Holy Spirit is prayed over the newly baptised person. Just as Kelvin will pray the Holy Spirit over the bread and the wine at the altar in 10 minutes or so. Christians are people of the Holy Spirit. People in whom God longs to dwell. And again you can see the mirror between today and Easter. How does the Easter cycle end? With the feast of Pentecost. The day when we remember that the Holy Spirit no longer limits himself or herself to specific individuals and occasions, but that the Holy Spirit pours like a torrent into the life of all those who love our Lord.

How would it be if we believed that? St Thomas's Salisbury, God has called you by name and made you his own. St

Thomas's, Salisbury, you share in the baptism of Christ, washing you, making you clean, incorporating you in the living and dying and rising life of Christ. St Thomas's Salisbury, the Holy Spirit is poured out upon you. How might we live, might you live, were that true.

Allow yourself to believe that God loves you that much. As we turn face the font, the place of our beginnings, as we encounter the water of both forgiveness and new life, dream about what that might mean. And, later, as you dip your finger in that water, and maybe make the sign of the cross, or some other sign, or just let the water run your fingers back into the bowl, remember the next time you encounter that water here, liturgically, it will be Easter Day. And the who God comes to be with us will be the God who has redeemed us. Called by name, washed in the river, filled with the Spirit. Onward! Amen.

Brothers and sisters if you are able to, I invite you to stand and turn the face the font.