

## 10<sup>th</sup> January 2021 6 pm Evening Prayer: The Baptism of John

Led by Emma Latham, Talk by Rob Latham, Readings by Emma Latham and Gill Heath

*This transcript is only of the readings and the talk.*

### **1<sup>st</sup> Reading: Acts 19:1-7**

1 While Apollos was at Corinth, Paul took the road through the interior and arrived at Ephesus. There he found some disciples 2 and asked them, “Did you receive the Holy Spirit when you believed?”

They answered, “No, we have not even heard that there is a Holy Spirit.”

3 So Paul asked, “Then what baptism did you receive?”

“John’s baptism,” they replied.

4 Paul said, “John’s baptism was a baptism of repentance. He told the people to believe in the one coming after him, that is, in Jesus.” 5 On hearing this, they were baptised in the name of the Lord Jesus. 6 When Paul placed his hands on them, the Holy Spirit came on them, and they spoke in tongues and prophesied. 7 There were about twelve men in all.

### **2<sup>nd</sup> Reading: Mark 1:4-11**

4 And so John came, baptising in the desert region and preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. 5 The whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem went out to him. Confessing their sins, they were baptised by him in the Jordan River. 6 John wore clothing made of camel’s hair, with a leather belt round his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey. 7 And this was his message: “After me will come one more powerful than I, the thongs of whose sandals I am not worthy to stoop down and untie. 8 I baptise you with water, but he will baptise you with the Holy Spirit.”

9 At that time Jesus came from Nazareth in Galilee, and was baptised by John in the Jordan. 10 As Jesus was coming up out of the water, he saw heaven being torn open and the Spirit descending on him like a dove. 11 And a voice came from heaven: “You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased.”

This is the Word of the Lord

**Thanks be to God**

### **Talk**

[Emma:] And now as Rob comes to share with us, I'll just say a prayer.

Heavenly Father, I pray that as Rob comes to speak to us this evening, that You will use his words, that You will speak through him, that Your words will find root in our hearts and in our lives. So just bless him and use him for Your glory now, in Jesus' name we pray, amen.

[Rob:] Amen.

If I could pray as well.

May the words of my mouth and the meditation of our hearts be acceptable always in Your sight, O Lord, our strength and our Redeemer.

[Emma:] Amen.

[Rob:]

Well, Christmas is a long way behind is now or is it not? I don't know, because I have to say that I have just only this afternoon packed away our Christmas

crib. And the reason for that is because during Christmas season, we only permit for the angel and the shepherds to visit the baby Jesus. And then on Epiphany, on the 6th of January, the shepherds departed the night before, and along come the Three Kings. And so for the last few days we've had the crib scene complete with the Three Kings. And we are now of course in the Epiphany season. Last Tuesday was actually Epiphany and today is technically Epiphany 1.

I've been doing some little bit of research last night, because I had an inkling that, way back in my days at theological college, I was told that Epiphany in the East was very much about the Incarnation of Jesus. And in the West, it was about the presentation of Jesus to the Gentiles. Epiphany literally means 'manifestation', making known. Well, if I try and unravel that a bit, I mean, when I talk about East and West, it's basically the Roman Catholic Church and the Eastern Orthodox Churches have two defined and slightly different traditions. It all emanates from the fact that there were originally five centres, main centres of Christianity during the early centuries of the church. And although the Roman Church became prominent, the Eastern Churches had their own style of doing things, as are witnessed by the different styles, Eastern Orthodox and Roman Catholicism (out of which we come) actually work. The first Christian festival that really came on the stage, of course, was Easter, the celebration of the Resurrection. The very fact that the Christian week begins with a Sunday, and that every Sunday is a celebration of Resurrection, bears token to that. And then other similar festivals are added in. Obviously the idea of the Cross before Easter, and Pentecost after Easter, they get in fairly quickly. You might be surprised to know that Christmas comes along relatively late, somewhere around about the fourth century. And both East and West, before Christmas was established as an event, actually kept their festivals of Incarnation on Epiphany, on the 6th of January. It's just the Roman Church developed the 25th of December, whereas the Eastern Church actually stuck with the 6th of January, although they do celebrate the birth of Jesus on the 25th. This is how I understand it anyway. But whereas we celebrate the coming of the Wise Men on Epiphany, the Eastern Church celebrates the Baptism of Jesus.

I'm quite glad, really, that we had, as our Gospel reading, the gospel of Mark, because of course the significance about Mark - it's the first gospel, it's the gospel that is heavily influential of what Matthew and Luke say, but it has no birth stories. And this takes us back to the way in which the Eastern Church celebrated the Incarnation, and I say that in a sense, to divide it from the Christmas stories: the Incarnation is celebrated in the East, not so much by remembering the birth of Jesus and His coming into the world in that way, but His arrival on the public scene.

And in Mark's gospel, the first thing we know about Jesus, is that John comes to prepare His way, and proclaims, as we heard in the Gospel, that we aren't worthy to untie His sandals, and that though John baptises in water, Jesus would baptise in the Holy Spirit. And the whole of the Epiphany season is actually about revealing and manifesting and making clear who this person is, this Jesus. You see, I think it's highly important, much as we know that Jesus has divine origins and that technically, theologically, He is both human and divine, but for the purpose of our thinking tonight, really the people of the first century Palestine, the people who knew Jesus man and boy would have just treated Him as a human being, just as an ordinary man, just like me. And no real difference really on that score. And so getting to know the reality of who this Man is, is what is actually done during the Epiphany season. It's getting to know the character of Jesus and all sorts of ways that He is unique and comes to our aid and salvation.

But, as I say, the Incarnation is therefore marked in a very different way because, you see, in the Eastern Church, just exactly as Mark does, we start with that public appearance and the baptism in the River Jordan. We might ask the question, "Well, it's all well and good, we know the story. But why was it

necessary for Jesus to be baptised anyway?" I think that one of the things of wisdom that is revealed in this, in a godly way, is that there is never any intention to disrupt what everybody can see in front of themselves. Because Jesus appeared as a human being, He actually has to be treated as such. I mean that we know the doctrinal thing that Jesus left behind the glory of Heaven in order to be appear as just a simple man. That is what Paul teaches in Philippians. In fact, he describes in Philippians that Jesus Christ does not seize equality with God<sup>1</sup> but empties Himself of the glory of Heaven, in order that He will be just a man. And I think this is so crucial, that we grasp hold that, in essence, Jesus comes exactly like one of us. I mean yes, there are fanciful stories in later centuries of Jesus behaving as though He always has semi-magical properties and can make clay sparrows and breathes on them and makes them fly, but, you see, if they were true, it would detract from what Jesus came to be, because He needed to be exactly like one of us. And in a sense, this desire not to kind-of impose a sort of super-human, a kind of God-likeness in His nature, before He received of God's Spirit in His baptism, is quite important. And Jesus simply comes as one of us, and therefore He has to show Himself willing to submit Himself to the things that every other human being at the time felt a need to. As John proclaimed a baptism of repentance, so Jesus comes like one of us, not trying to stand out, or say He's better than us, but just simply accepts that this is what His Father's will is, that He should be exactly like us, and receive this baptism of repentance.

But you see, in that obedience, something marvellous happens. As Jesus goes down into the water He submits, John protests, he says, "Well, I should be baptised by you." But Jesus says, "No, this is what the Father wants. Let it be so for now." And in that process, as Jesus comes out of the water, having submitted like one of us to the baptism of repentance (of course He did not need to repent) something wonderful happens. As Jesus looks up, Heaven is rent open, the Holy Spirit comes down and rests on Him, as though a dove alights on Him. And Jesus receives the Holy Spirit. And then the voice from Heaven comes, "This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased." The Father is simply affirming that Jesus has done the right thing by not making a ruckus and saying, "I don't need to be baptised by John!" But by being baptised by John, it opens up the way for a new baptism to be set forth, a baptism that's no longer just about repenting of sins. Of course that's foundational, that is something that undergirds Christian baptism. But the new baptism is not only that, it is also about the filling in of the Holy Spirit, about the giving of life, eternal life through the indwelling of God Himself into our hearts and lives. That is what we are called to do when we ourselves are baptised.

We obscure it a bit in Church because we baptise children, maybe it's not quite the same with St. John's, but we baptise children, and then 10, 12, 15 years later, we expect them to come to Confirmation, which is again about being filled with the Holy Spirit. But the crucial thing is there: is that we follow the pattern of Jesus in the sense that we come in baptism to repent, to acknowledge our sin before God, and to receive of His life and light, and to receive of the Holy Spirit, so that God is not out there but in here, in our hearts, in our lives. He makes a new pattern for us to follow. And the pattern of Jesus' baptism is the pattern that we should pick up and understand, that is about how we receive that baptism into our hearts and lives and become active and participating Christians.

And indeed, right from the moment that Jesus is baptised and then calls His disciples (which is another aspect of Epiphany) we move in to the idea that Jesus and His disciples baptise also. We move into the idea that the early Church calls people into baptism. On the day of Pentecost, when 3,000 people responded to Peter's sermon, the crowd asked<sup>2</sup>, "What shall we do?" Peter said, "Repent and be baptised, and you will be forgiven, and you shall receive the

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1 Philippians 2:6

2 Acts 2:37-38

Holy Spirit." The pattern continues: the life of Jesus is brought into the new believers by us repenting, being forgiven, and receiving the life of God into us, the Holy Spirit is very present within us. That happened to 3,000 people on the day of Pentecost, and it carries on through the Acts of the Apostles, as people are baptised in various ways and at various times. In fact, one way of understanding the Acts of the Apostles, another phrase which we could use to describe it, is 'the Holy Spirit in action', because God in the Holy Spirit dwelling in the believers moves forward and engages with the mission of the Church.

And then we have this interesting story from Acts of the Apostles, where Paul is moved from Corinth. He's left behind Apollos there to continue the work in Corinth, and he comes by the back way, apparently, to Ephesus. There he encounters 12 men, no idea who they are, what their ages were, or anything else. We do know they're believers. Well, almost. It appears there is a problem. And Paul says to them, "Did you receive the Holy Spirit when you were baptised?" "Holy Spirit, whatever are you on about? The Holy Spirit? What is the Holy Spirit? Who is the Holy Spirit?" So Paul asks the obvious question, "Which baptism were you baptised in?" And they say, "The baptism of John." Well, here we are, you see. John's baptism, as we know, was a baptism of repentance. How can they possibly get to know and understand and receive the Holy Spirit, unless they're baptised in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ, which is exactly what Paul then proceeds to do, and all is well, are re-baptised, in the name of the Lord Jesus, they receive the Holy Spirit. If I remember rightly, they also speak in tongues.

Do you see how the pattern works? That we see Jesus becoming a man who is filled with the Holy Spirit in His baptism, changing John's baptism into the baptism that we then receive, so that we human beings can receive the Holy Spirit. You could say there's a process of new creation going on here. And again, this is important for us to grasp, why Jesus has to accept His limitations, simply as a man, as I said at the beginning. Because you see, Jesus sets this new pattern, this new blueprint, for what humanity actually is. He is come from Heaven, but leaving aside the glory of Heaven, and then is filled with Heaven again, in order that He might be a human being filled with the Spirit, in the same pattern that we are. And that pattern is what we take on board.

I've used in the past the Saints Alive course, which I found very helpful to develop, particularly in the church plant that I led before my last parish. And then again, in Hallow, Grimley and Holt. And this pattern of us human beings following the style of Jesus and receiving the Holy Spirit into our lives, to therefore be like Jesus is really quite important. And it is a very central theme of the Saints Alive course. And the way it was explained to me subsequently, when I was in South Africa, is there is a new creation that is made. In other words, Jesus becomes the first fruits, the firstborn of this new creation, a man with God in His life. And that's what we become as we respond to the call of Jesus, to know Him, to love Him and to follow Him, to repent, be baptised, and we're filled with the Holy Spirit, human beings with God inside us. There is a new creation that is begun, and in which we are therefore part.

I don't know whether you've ever heard of a guy called Myles Munroe - I think he was from the Bahamas. I first encountered him at a Spring Harvest time, when Emma and I went to Spring Harvest. And I was quite impressed by the boldness of his preaching. I also was sad when we were last in South Africa to actually miss him preaching at the church we were connected with through most of our time there. But we were fortunate that we had DVDs given to us of his presentation, of his preaching. Sadly, he died some years ago. He was in an aeroplane that was trying to land, I think at his home in the Bahamas, and it crashed, so sadly he's no longer with us. But you see, Myles Munroe in his teaching in South Africa spoke of how God's purposes are to bring us human beings back into the inheritance that we lost when Adam and Eve first took the forbidden fruit, the

fruit of knowledge of good and evil, contrary to God's instructions, and ate of it. He said that God's desire is to bring us back to being the true humanity, the true human beings, that God always intended us to be. If you remember the story when God made Adam and Eve, well, actually, the story is told before Eve comes onto the picture, that when God made Adam<sup>3</sup>, He formed a body out of the earth, gathered the dust together and made this body which He then presumably made into flesh, and then breathed His life, breathed His Spirit into this new Adam. And then Adam was called a living soul, because the Spirit of God had been breathed into him and gave him life. And that is exactly what we are called on to be, to be living souls, people alive in body, soul and spirit, not just simply because we're born, because when we're born we just simply inherit all the problems that we often call Original Sin. But God's desire is for us to respond to His love, to the love of Jesus, the man who going, in the fullness of time, to the Cross, wrought for us our salvation by the defeat of Satan, and taking our place, so that we might have the inheritance that He can give, of filling us with Holy Spirit.

So in a sense, we are called on to become living souls, to be like Jesus, a man, a woman with God in our lives, in the midst of us. I think [Charles] Wesley summed it up in words<sup>4</sup> that he obviously took from the second letter to the Corinthians<sup>5</sup>:

Finish, then, thy new creation;  
pure and spotless let us be.  
Let us see thy great salvation  
perfectly restored in thee.  
Changed from glory into glory,  
till in Heav'n we take our place,  
till we cast our crowns before thee,  
lost in wonder, love and praise.

Brothers and sisters in Christ, may I encourage you to be living souls, to be people who are transformed by the indwelling Spirit, to be the new humanity, the new creation of God's love and blessings, and that He may guide us and lead us throughout our lives together.  
Amen.

[Emma:] Amen. Thanks Rob.

[Transcribed by Hamish Blair with help from <https://otter.ai>]

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3 Genesis 2:7

4 Love Divine, All Loves Excelling – written in 1747

5 2 Corinthians 3:18, 2 Corinthians 4:16-5:5