

St Peter's Ealing
Sunday 12th January 2020
Baptism of the Lord YrA

This is my son, the beloved.

In some respects having today's celebration may seem a little odd; if only because in one week we have leapt about 30 years in the story of Jesus. Last week we celebrated the Epiphany with the visit of the Magi to the infant Jesus. The gentile visit that, through the gifts offered proclaimed the divine kingship of this sacrificial man.

Today, 30 years later, we have something similar. A story of proclamation, identification and validation, all in one seemingly small, though not insignificant event.

John, a great prophet, is calling the people of Israel to repentance, to come and be cleansed of their sin and reconciled to God, renewing their lives before God. Then enters Jesus. Although Matthew doesn't actually preach or teach as such, Jesus' sinless status is assumed. John is preaching baptism for the forgiveness of sins. So, for Matthew, what is happening here? Jesus' submission to this baptism is somewhat awkward, hence John's protestation. But for Matthew this is vital for the fulfilment of righteousness and the biblical prophecies in which Jesus would be well versed – one of which we heard from Isaiah this morning. Jesus, knowing the Messianic prophecies, obediently fulfils them and thereby fulfils all righteousness. Jesus is not only self-identifying through his actions his relationship with God, he is identifying the call to righteousness of all people.

The advent of the dove as Jesus comes up out of the water, surprisingly, has evoked much discussions in the world of biblical scholars. Many commentators make a connection between this dove and the dove in the story of Noah – where in the later instance we have deliverance from the flood and the former we now have a proclamation of deliverance from sin. Connections are also made with the spirit hovering over the waters of the Red Sea as the waters were parted for the people of Israel escaping slavery in Egypt under the leadership of Moses. Thus, for Christians, two great salvation events are drawn together validating the second, the ministry, death and resurrection of Jesus the Christ, the Son of the living God.

If further validation is required, this idea of spirit hovering over water should also draw our minds to Genesis 1.2; the creation story, in the beginning of which the Spirit of God hovered over the waters; and at the end of the gospel story the Spirit will hover over the apostles as they are sent out to preach the good news of the risen and ascended Christ to all the world.

If we are still uncertain of who or what Jesus is we also have proclamation; the voice from heaven, witnessed by John and those standing near by. For the well versed in scripture the words of the heavenly voice conflate two passages of prophecy – one in Ps2:7 and the other from our Isaiah reading today (Isa 42:1). The result is the revelation of Jesus to the gathered crowd as well as the reader as the son of God and the Suffering Servant, another prophetic image of the nature of the Messiah, the Saviour of the world.

Jesus, then, is proclaimed, validated and identified. He is the Son of God, foretold in the words of the prophets who fulfils the righteousness of God, succumbing to God's will, validated by God's own Spirit; drawing together the whole salvific story of creation from the very beginning, through key stories of salvation, brought to a climax in this one man.

All powerful stuff – what is it to us? A fulfilled proclamation of him in whom we believe. In this figure coming out of the waters of the Jordan is now someone who offers us a way forward in life that has meaning and purpose. This is a man, one of us, yet it is in him we are offered forgiveness of sins. We signify this in our baptism and again when ever we stand before the font proclaiming our faith in him who came and died for us, rising on the third day that we might know God's love for ourselves.

As Jesus comes up out of the waters and the voice of heaven proclaims him His beloved with whom he is well pleased so that proclamation is made for us. As we follow Christ along the way of faith and truth, proclaiming him through the waters of baptism and the broken bread of the eucharist, God looks at us and says, "This is my child, with who I am well pleased."