

REFLECTION : The Baptism of Christ written by Jacqueline Kemp (Reader)

Post Christmas and we greet one another with 'Happy New Year' adding (maybe under our breath) it has to be better than 2020. This is the time to look forward with hope and resolutions; to be slimmer, fitter, maybe begin to achieve a long-held ambition.

In this first week of the new year, we put away the Christmas decorations and turn hopefully to new beginnings. The Church year follows the same pattern. The birth narratives of Jesus are in the past and immediately we jump forward to Jesus as a mature man, about thirty years of age, starting out on his three year ministry and asking his kinsman, John to baptise him in the River Jordan.

What happened between the birth and the grown man? No-one knows. The only recorded incident was Jesus' first pilgrimage to Jerusalem at the age of twelve. Missing during the return journey, he was eventually found in the Temple conversing with the elders and teachers who were 'amazed at his understanding.'

John the Baptist can be seen as the last prophet, telling the people to get ready because their long awaited Messiah, the Saviour of the Jewish people, was coming soon. To prepare, he said that they had to repent, to rethink, put away their past selfish ways and resolve to start again. To indicate their new resolution they were invited to plunge themselves in the River Jordan. Ritual washing, yes, but far more than that. Being totally immersed in water potentially indicates death (totally terrifying to some-one like me who cannot swim) and rising again from the water is to live and breath again, the birth of a 'new man'.

But why would Jesus need to be baptised in this way? And this is what John himself said. Jesus would not need a baptism of repentance. At the baptism of Jesus a new dimension was added. The Gospel writer sees this as a blessing and endorsement of Jesus and his purpose as the teacher and Saviour of all by saying that the spirit of God descended and a voice said, 'You are my Son whom I love, with you I am well pleased.' It also indicates a spiritual awakening with God present, active and welcoming.

It is clear, reading the book of Acts, that from the earliest times Christianity practised baptism as a recognition of an individual's acceptance of the faith. Today's reading from Acts emphasises the difference between John's baptism of repentance and the baptism of Jesus.

My son married a young woman from a Baptist family and after study and reflection he decided to be re-baptised by total immersion. I was present and impressed by the fact that he had to declare his Christian belief to a congregation of 200 before being plunged in a tank of water. I regretted that I was unable to remember my own infant baptism and felt that confirmation had come too early. When in church we baptise an infant in the main service of the day and sometimes sometimes we are invited to repeat our baptismal promises, I am consoled.

At the Reformation, the question of infant baptism was debated widely. Many Protestants decided to have only adult, believers baptism but the established Church of England continued to baptise infants, with the understanding that a later service of confirmation would follow in adulthood. Acts 19 v 1-7 was often quoted as justification for this practice.

I have had many conversations with clergy about this in modern times. Some have decided only to baptise infants from Christian families but this has caused hurt and resentment amongst those who are turned away. One bishop felt that we should delay confirmation until young people were adult enough to make an important decisions, maybe 18+. He encouraged these services, building in an opportunity for the candidates to give personal testimony and using water as well as the laying on of hands as part of the ritual. Another parish priest, when asked about preparation for confirmation, said he used the 'Alpha' course. For those who are unfamiliar with the course, it was written by Nicky Gumbriel, an Anglican priest, and is widely used by Protestant congregations in response to 'enquiring' adults. Some of these people have already been baptised as infants, but for others a glorious service both of baptism by water and the laying on of hands is the result.

So baptism is a new beginning, one endorsed by Jesus himself. Hopefully 2021, with the new vaccines increasingly available will be a happy one when we can meet friends and family without restriction and resume our worship services again.