

Baptism of Christ 2017

Acts 10: 34 – 43; Matthew 3: 13 – end

Call me grumpy if you want, but I suspect I'm not the only person here who on Tuesday morning sighed a great sigh of relief because we were getting back to a bit of normality! Never mind festivities: we want routine! This celebrating Christmas is all very well, but it's not normal.

And that's as true of our spirituality as it is about domestic routines. Christmas is just not normal: we worship with different spiritual faculties to the ones we routinely use. Christmas is unashamedly a time for indulging our sentimentality and allowing ourselves to be carried along, immersed in awe and wonder. Somebody was telling me that when we had the nativity - and all the kids looked so cute dressed as shepherds and angels, and we had the donkey and the sheep - this person was telling me, that when Mim brought Grace Elizabeth and placed her on the straw

before Mary and Joseph in the place of our Lord, they were quite choked up. And that's how Christmas operates: it appeals to the emotions. It's not a time for theological analysis or explanations: it's just a time for watching and listening with awe. And that's why I don't like preaching at Midnight Mass - it's why I got Christine to do it instead! I don't want words. I just want to see that central white candle lit on the Advent wreath, watch the Christ-child being placed in, sing the last verse of O Come All Ye Faithful - "Ye, Lord, we greet thee" - and let it sink in: Emmanuel, God-is-with-us.

But nurturing our discipleship of Jesus involves more than watching and listening with awe. And now, a bit of normality has been restored. We're nagged by the words of St. Paul in the Epistle to the Philippians that we must work out our salvation with fear and trembling. And we start doing that by observing the season of Epiphany.

The Revd Matthew Pollard, Rector of Bridlington Priory

Epiphany is more than the story of the magi journeying to adore the Christ-child and bringing gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh. It's a whole season of four weeks dedicated to reflecting upon what is revealed about God by Jesus: how we know more about God because of Jesus; how we draw closer to God by being in relationship with Jesus; and how we're saved by God through Jesus.

The whole scheme of the salvation that we're working out with fear and trembling is summarised pithily for us in this morning's first reading, from Acts chapter 10. It starts with the Baptism of Jesus, goes through his earthly ministry, his death and his resurrection; and it ends with his followers being commissioned to testify to him. And the result of him being testified to is that people receive forgiveness; life is transformed. So it goes from Baptism of Jesus to commissioning of believers.

The baptism of Jesus is performed by John the Baptist. He was already there baptising folk before Jesus came along. John was offering a baptism of repentance. So what Jesus asked for was what John was offering. Jesus asked for a baptism of repentance. We might find that problematical because we might get stuck on the idea that Jesus can't have had anything to repent of; and therefore a baptism of repentance was meaningless or superfluous.

But that's to misunderstand the Christian concept of repentance. In everyday language repentance is about deciding to change a course of conduct; but that's not what Christian repentance is about¹. So, to take a trivial example: I might decide that I eat too many chocolate biscuits and that I ought to eat fewer of them. In everyday language I repent of eating so many and resolve to eat fewer. But Christian repentance is

¹ This section of the sermon draws on John Howard Yoder [1971] *The Original Revolution: Essays on Christian Pacifism*. The flaw in my argument is that it leads to a weak Christology: it's as if Jesus had a Christological function that could be turned on or off.

The Revd Matthew Pollard, Rector of Bridlington Priory

nothing to do with us setting our own agenda and asking God to endorse it, whether it's to do with chocolate biscuits, bitchiness, lasciviousness, social justice or world peace. Repentance is nothing to do with God endorsing our agenda.

Christian repentance is about turning to God. Full stop. Not about turning to God in order to bring about a difference. Just about turning to God. The result of turning to God, of course, is that we will be changed, whether we like it or not; and whether or not the change conforms to our preconceived notions of what we want to happen. We will be changed because we will meet his Kingdom, be incorporated into it and be commissioned to put its values into practice. If we fully repent, we will be incapable of acting in ways inconsistent with God's Kingdom; and we do only act inconsistently with the Kingdom to the extent that we fail fully to repent, to turn fully to him and to submit ourselves fully to him.

Jesus needed to seek a baptism of repentance in order to be commissioned into his earthly ministry and to be empowered for it – not in order to stop behaving the way he used to and start behaving differently; but to be empowered and commissioned into the ministry which this morning we've heard summarised in Acts 10 as “doing good and healing all who were oppressed by the devil” and then to have the courage to submit to being put to death by being hanged on a tree.

Jesus accepted John's baptism of repentance in order fully to identify with us and to demonstrate to us how we seek to be empowered and commissioned by God. And that's why in the next part of our service we give thanks for baptism and we make an act of repentance in order to be empowered and commissioned and sent out in order to end up wherever God takes us – scary, but good.

Amen.

The Revd Matthew Pollard, Rector of Bridlington Priory