

## **Baptism of Christ. Sunday 9 January 2022 10 am at St. John's**

*Isaiah 43.1-7; [Psalm 29;] Acts 8.14-17; Luke 3.15-17; 21-22*

Yesterday we took our Christmas tree to be chipped and recycled.

“Although this is a pretty good Hoover, I’m sure we will be finding pine needles over the next couple of months” said my husband Peter, as we cleared up the debris in the sitting room. Have you found this, that Christmas does not fully go away? Maybe that’s no bad thing. Because in an odd way, perhaps it is image of what this post-Christmas season of Epiphany is about?

I will try and explain my thinking.

Do have a look at the picture of Jesus’ baptism. It is a photo of a picture I saw in a retreat house in Derbyshire nine years ago. I know little about it, except that it seems to be in the style of a Byzantine icon. Bottom left are some Greek letters, meaning Epiphany. The E at the beginning has been covered up by the mount.

I don’t know quite what it is about it, but I love this image. I guess that is the nature of icons – images that draw you in and show something of God.

In this image, we actually see the Trinity – God, Jesus and the Holy Spirit. We see Jesus in the water of the river Jordan at his baptism, the Holy Spirit descending upon him *‘in bodily form like a dove. And a voice came from heaven, “You are my son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased,”* as the gospel reading says.

Epiphany means manifestation or revelation, hence the title of the icon. At Jesus’ baptism, his true nature is revealed. He is the beloved son of God. This is the point at which John the baptiser – seen standing on the riverbank in the icon - who has been so prominent, humbly steps back and Jesus begins his ministry. “He will baptise you with the Holy Spirit and fire” (v.16)

We could ask, ‘Why does Jesus get baptised, if he is the Son of God?’

Commentators suggest two connected reasons, which are related to the fact that Jesus is human as well as divine.

Firstly, the genealogy of Jesus, listed in Luke Chapter 3, shows that along the way, there were some tragic and destructive choices made by his ancestors. They have personal flaws. They are human. For example, in v.38, Jesus’ line is traced right back to Seth, son of Adam, son of God. Seth is considered to be a replacement for Abel, killed by his brother Cain, as told in Genesis 4.25. Jesus’ baptism is a signal that he is identifying with, or showing solidarity with, the human world, fully acknowledging its tragic structure. You could call this ‘systemic sin’ – there’s no getting away from it. You can’t help but be born into it because it has pervaded everything from the beginning and has had ongoing consequences – tragic choices having damaging knock-on effects in future generations. We probably know people to whom this applies, and hopefully it helps us have compassion on them.

The second explanation for why Jesus got baptised is that it was an act of solidarity with all of the people who had been broken by the wear and tear of the selfish world. So, he got in line with them in the hope of a new beginning through a return to God. He was identifying with the damaged and broken people who needed God.

What has this got to do with Christmas tree needles remaining in corners of the sitting room for weeks to come?

At Christmas, we hear again how God entered the world in the infant Jesus. The Word became flesh and dwelt among us. We put a lot of energy and effort into preparing for this joyful celebration. There could then be a danger that once it is all over and the Christmas tree is thrown out, we forget the importance of the Christmas story. Epiphany underlines that Jesus came to show us what God is like, that he loves and forgives us unconditionally and this is for all people for all time. And it is an *ongoing* truth which we can live by each day. Something that we want to remember. It never goes away. Perhaps like those pine needles which will keep turning up for weeks to come!

In the icon, look at Jesus' expression. You could imagine that he is praying. The Luke reading says, "...when Jesus also had been baptised and was praying, the heaven was opened and the Holy Spirit descended upon him ..." (vv. 21-22)

For Jesus, during his frequent times of prayer, the Holy Spirit came to him. It would be his source of strength and a connection to God his father, especially in the tough times in his ministry. The same is true for us as we pray. At our baptism, we received the Holy Spirit to be with us.

This is a good time to be reminded of the importance of our own baptism. Today's readings echo some of the words that will be familiar to us in the baptism liturgy. As one commentator sums it up:

In the waters of baptism, we understand that God marks us and claims us as God's children.

In the waters of baptism, God seals God's love for us, no matter what we might have done and what might happen.

In the waters of our baptism, God gives evidence of what God says to Jesus in Luke 3.22: "You are my child, the Beloved, with you I am well pleased."

If you find it helpful, please accept this as a gift and may this picture be a reminder of these wonderful truths for us and for all people, during this Epiphany season and as we go through this new year.

AMEN