



**Baptism of Christ**  
**Epiphany 1**  
**14 January 2018**  
**Revd Jenny Wilkens**  
**Genesis 1:1-5**  
**Acts 19: 1-7**  
**Mark 1: 4-11**



I love that we reflect on the baptism of Jesus in this Epiphany season, and the liturgy which focusses round water with all its cleansing, refreshing and renewing power. It comes home to us afresh as we've lived through weeks without rain, keenly aware of drought-stricken farms and wilting gardens, and then the joy of good rain, with all its refreshing, reviving, greening power.

I still recall vividly from my visits in the Holy Land being in the dryness and heat of the desert in the Jordan valley near the Dead Sea. It is geographically the lowest place on earth and one of the hottest places on earth. Pilgrims and tourists go there these days to cover themselves in the therapeutic Dead Sea mud and to float in the salty water.

But at the time of Jesus and his cousin John there was a community who lived near here known as the Essenes. They had withdrawn from the cities, where they believed life was corrupt and compromised, and went to live in the desert to wait for the Messiah. The deserts of first century Palestine were alive with the fervent religiosity of people who believed that the Messiah, the anointed one promised by the prophets, was about to come. The birth of Jesus we have just celebrated, took place in that context of feverish rumour and expectation. Some of the people were looking for God's decisive intervention in their world. It's hard for us to reach back across the centuries and get under the skin of the thought-world and imagination of first century contemporaries of Jesus and John – we may be struggling to conjure up pictures of deserts, people in long robes and sandals and parched, wild preachers demanding commitment from the crowds listening to them. There were however many preachers and magicians and healers living in the deserts around Jerusalem and each had their own group of disciples and ideologies.

John, son of Elizabeth and Zechariah and cousin of Jesus of Nazareth was one of these. He was not known as John the Essene (although scholars believe he may have belonged to that community), he was not known as John the miracle worker or healer or preacher. He was known as John the Baptistiser – or as we have changed his title in English, John the Baptist.

He was out there in the desert living a brutally ascetic life and telling anyone who would listen that they needed to change their lives. He didn't say "follow me" but he did say that the Kingdom of God was very near. He urged the crowds who came to listen to him that they had to change – to turn away from their corrupt way of life – to "repent", literally to "turn around" and follow the Messiah whom he admitted neither he nor they had yet met.

Then he performed a version of the ritual practised by the Essenes, whose life was determined by the ritual washing they did every day. He led people to the river and urged them to be immersed in it – to be baptised.

Today we remember the moment when Jesus walked into the river Jordan and John baptises him. For us, familiar with this story, we might forget how shocking this is. The gospel writers are writing to persuade their audiences that Jesus is the Son of God. It is the beginning of Jesus' public ministry, yet he begins it by submitting himself to another. He will continue this manner of ministry as three years later he will wash Peter's feet, allow the woman from the city to anoint him and ultimately submit to the authority of Pilate who crucified him. For the men, women and children who would have encountered John the baptiser and Jesus standing waist deep in the River Jordan, their motivation for being there was as varied as ours for being here this morning.

I recall my visit with our pilgrim group to the banks of the river Jordan, on the West Bank, thought to be fairly close to where John the Baptist was baptising, and Jesus was baptised. That was pretty much a region of dry grass with the brown river snaking through, and it's not a wide river. There were Jordanian soldiers in a shelter just a few metres away from where we gathered on the West bank side, watched by Israeli soldiers. We Kiwis renewed our baptismal vows, and alongside us were a very joyful group of Ethiopians all dressed in white robes, baptising their small children. We were a very international group, brought together by that strip of water.

The presence of soldiers reminded us it was, till a few years ago, contested land. The Israelis have developed it as a site for Christians to renew their baptismal vows only in the last few years, once a considerable mine clearance was carried out. Here is another borderland between the West Bank and Jordan, part of the story of the difficult relationships between Israel and Palestine; Jew, Christian and Muslim.

Is there a message in today's reading from the book of Acts where the gospel of baptism in the name of Jesus Christ leaps across borders from being only for Jews, to being also for the Gentiles, here of Ephesus? They too are baptised in the name of Jesus Christ, they too receive the gift of God's promised Holy Spirit, they too are welcomed into the community of the church.

Is this what we need to hold together in our polarising world: our common baptism, just as Jesus Christ received baptism, human just like us?

The power of the ritual of baptism is perhaps much more than we can imagine. For there with the domestic imagery of washing, cleansing, of new birth, there is also the imagery of danger, of risk, of drowning, of death to the old and resurrection to the new.

John the Baptist proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins calls us to go deep in the river. It is not a call to feel vaguely sorry for things we might have slipped up on; it is a constant call to turn, to re-orientate our lives away from the egotism that fights for our own way at any cost, and to allow ourselves to be spiritually naked before the one who judges us with infinite mercy and love.

The imagery of baptism, of being immersed in a flowing river, teaches us that we have to learn to go with the flow of the Spirit, that going under and coming up are constant parts of life and that it is never too late to get back in the water.

A poet (Richard Wilbur) has written, *All our life is touched by ocean, but we stand on the shore of what we know*. We are called to live our lives knowing that we are in touch with the vastness of the loving presence of God. But human concerns keep us looking down at our feet, at what we know already, our perspective narrows – it feels safer to stick with what we are living now. *All our life is touched by ocean, but we stand on the shore of what we know*.

A wise monk (Br Mark Brown, Society of St John the Evangelist) has said this: *To let go of what we think we know, to make room for new epiphanies, requires a willingness to accept fluidity, flux, change, growth. The willingness to not be locked in to a previous edition of ourselves, not be locked in to previous editions of others, or even previous editions of who we think Jesus is*.

Christ came not just to show us what **God** is like, but to show us, at the River Jordan, what **human life** can be like, drenched in the grace and mercy of God. Baptism is the gateway to a rhythm of life that refuses to become dry and desiccated, that seeks to stand under the abundantly showering forth rain of the Spirit of God: a life that drinks in the profound beauty of the created world, a life that is willing to flow with the Spirit's direction, and a life that is poured out to bring life to others.

As we meet today around the waters of baptism, and the table of the bread and wine of new life in Jesus Christ, may we hear God's voice say to each one of us afresh, as we begin this new year:

'You are my son, you are my daughter, the beloved, with you I am well pleased'. Amen.

[some of this adapted from a sermon by Canon Lucy Winkett, St Paul's Cathedral, London, 10/1/2010]