

Christ Church Cranbrook
Sermon for The First Sunday After The Epiphany
January 13, 2013
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The late Dean Inge of London's St. Paul's Cathedral said, "The gospel is not good advice but good news." Another said, "The gospel that went out into the hard Roman world was not a robin redbreast on a Christmas card; it was not the motto 'Peace on Earth' picked out in cotton or wool; it was the affirmation of a Christ who lived, was crucified, and rose from the dead." These observations are clearly portrayed in the baptism of Jesus in the Jordan River.

Christian tradition puts the site near the place where God's people entered the Promised Land after forty years in that wilderness. Luke's gospel tells us that after everyone else had been baptized, Jesus was baptized. While he was praying, heaven was opened, the Holy Spirit descended upon him, and a voice came from heaven, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased."

He had been made manifest as the Messiah to the Judean shepherds and the gentile Magi who visited him in his infancy in Bethlehem. Now, in adulthood, his identity is disclosed in his baptism. Jesus' baptism raises two questions and I want to explore them with you this morning.

Why was Jesus baptized? I believe there are at least three answers to this question and all three should be seen against the backdrop of the history of God's people.

First, Jesus was baptized to inaugurate the new dimension of God's reign. You will recall that on the way to the Promised Land, God's people were disobedient and were made to wander in the wilderness for forty years as an act of penance. God provided a leader, Joshua, to lead the people through the waters of the Jordan into the Land of Milk and Honey – the land God had promised to their forbearers. As they passed through the waters, they left their past behind and emerged as a renewed, reconstituted, and rededicated people. All of this was reenacted that day centuries later when Joshua bar Joseph, the One we call Jesus Christ, plunged into the Jordan and emerged to lead those who would follow after him into the Kingdom of God as a royal priesthood and a holy nation.

Second, Jesus was baptized because he had reached the point in his life when he was ready to do what he was sent to do. His baptism did not *make* him the Son of God. Luke shows us that he was the Son of God from the beginning. Rather, his baptism was his anointing, his ordination for the ministry he was to carry out now that his formative years were over. But even more important was the fact that he heard the Divine Voice. The words God spoke to him were the words of Psalm 2:7, used at the coronation of Israel's king, combined with Isaiah 42:1, a description of the servant of God. The Voice was not addressed to everyone in Luke's account, but to Jesus; "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased." Jesus heard it because he was ready to hear and obey it. He was ready morally, spiritually, and intellectually for the experience, which came upon him there at the Jordan. He was ready to align his will with the will of the One whose Voice spoke to him. There are moments like this in every person's life; moments to which we have grown and for which we are now ready to see, to hear, to be, and to do things for which we were not ready before.

Third, Jesus was baptized because he had to be involved in the life of his people. So, he identified with them. He did not hold himself aloof and apart. He went down into the waters of the river just as the rest of the people did. He was sent to be Emmanuel, God *with* us. He accepted the sign of John's baptism. It would not be the last time he identified with his people in their sin and took it upon himself. That was his mission: to be the new Joshua, ready to make the purpose and destiny of his life at one with God's, ready to bring salvation's light to the world. In his baptism, Jesus shows us that the God we worship is not a God who hovers above the clouds. Instead, the God we adore is with us in the wilderness of life. This God is involved with people. Our God goes with us and leads us into the new and abundant life that has been promised. Even before God demands anything, even before God speaks, God comes to us, wedding that which is heavenly to that which is earthly.

The second question is this: What does this experience in Jesus' life have to do with us?

First, a meaningful life begins with a vision - of something supremely, desirably, and ultimately valuable. This vision may come early or late in life, but whenever it comes, life truly *begins!* Our own baptism, whether early or late, is the sign of the vision God holds before us as God's grace works in us. Sometimes, God works quietly, almost imperceptibly. At other times, God's involvement in our lives is dramatic, glorious, and awesome. Whenever we claim our baptism and live out of its promise, we embrace that vision, just as Jesus embraced the vision that was given to him that day in the waters of the Jordan. When we recall that we are baptized and recapture the vision of the promised land of milk and honey where we are called to live, we can go on to be the people we were called to be.

Second, a meaningful life is a life of prayer. Jesus heard the Voice and the Spirit descended *while he was praying*. At the in the Ascension, he instructed his followers to wait in Jerusalem until the Spirit came upon them. They did so and the Spirit came *while they were praying*. Likewise, we cannot faithfully live as God's people unless and until we are a people of prayer. Every meaning-filled life, especially that of a community of faith, is a life of prayer.

Episcopalians are taught that it is the duty of all Christians to "work, pray, and give for the spread of the kingdom of God." Every time we join in the reaffirmation of the Baptismal Covenant, we say that we will "continue in the apostles' teaching and fellowship, in the breaking of bread, and in the prayers." We are supposed to pray. There is really no place for debate over the issue. We said we would – all of us. If we want our Church to amount to anything, to live up to its God-given destiny, we need to pray!

And, Jesus' baptism assures us that when we follow him into the waters, we will be empowered.

"Empowerment" – That's a big word. It means that we will be infused with a power we did not have before. It means that when we are thinking, "I could never do that" or "It's a good idea, but it'll never work" or "where is all the money going to come from?" or "It's somebody else's problem" or "the situation is hopeless", we do not have to be afraid. The words of Isaiah come to mind: "Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are mine. When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you; when you walk through fire you shall not be burned, and the flame shall not consume you. For I am the Lord your God, the Holy One of Israel, your Savior" (Isaiah 43:1-3).

To the questions in the baptismal liturgy, we respond, "With God's help, I will." That's covenant language. It acknowledges that what we are called to do and who we are called to be requires power beyond our own. It means, "I will pursue the life of faith with the empowerment of God." When the power of God enters your life and the life of our Church, the incredible happens. The Gospel ceases to be good advice and becomes good news! The Incarnation ceases to be thought of in terms of robin redbreasts and benign slogans and becomes a torrent of water, wind, and fire. The baptismal waters haunt us. They were there before we came to faith; at some point they washed over us, flooding our souls with the cleansing awareness that we are God's. They have buoyed us up when our faith has been uncertain. They stretch out before us like an ever-flowing steam. We just can't get away from these waters.

I love the stories of Norman Maclean. In the one that was made into a motion picture a few years ago, he writes a line that suggests so much about the waters of baptism flowing through our lives: "Eventually, all things merge into one, and a river runs through it... I am haunted by waters" (Norman Maclean, *A River Runs Through It and Other Stories*). I don't know if Professor Maclean is consciously alluding to the baptismal waters. But what I do know is that the promise of God is that eventually all things *will* merge into a beautiful wholeness according to the eternal design. And, there is a river... running through the garden, running through the wilderness, running through the city of God, running through our lives and the life of this community of believers. When you and I stepped into that river at our Baptism, we received vision, grace, and power. Those waters haunt us. They wash over us, cleansing us, quenching our thirst, and propelling us through life. Finally, as they stretch from one end of creation to the other, they will bring us white robed and sparkling clean into the very presence of God. "Eventually, all things merge into one, and a river runs through it. I am haunted by waters."