

A sermon given on Sunday 12th January 2019 at St Michael's Church, Sandhurst

Readings: Isaiah 61:1-4; Matthew 3:13-17

Introduction

On 4th July 2014 HM the Queen took part in a ceremony at Portmouth Dockyard to name the new aircraft carrier *Queen Elizabeth*. As is traditional, a bottle of champagne was broken against the hull of the ship. (See <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BO3hNcaxWLI>)

The Queen Elizabeth can travel at over 25 knots, has a crew complement of 679 not including aircraft personnel, and has berths for up to 1,600 people.

The cost of the ship and its sister ship the *Prince of Wales*, including the Lockheed F35B Lightning II fighter aircraft, is estimated to be around £13 bn. Its mission is to enable the United Kingdom, and the Royal Navy in particular, to be able to defend British interests, and the peace and security of ourselves and our allies, anywhere in the world.

Later this morning I will baptise a little girl called Taylor. The high point in the service will be when I take her in my arms and pour water over her head. The symbolic washing with water represents God's promise to cleanse her from sin, but I couldn't help noticing a similarity with the breaking of the bottle of champagne against the hull of the aircraft carrier. Both ceremonies represent a symbolic launching. In the case of the ship, it is to publicly inaugurate its life as a sea-going vessel. In the case of a baptism, we are initiating the person baptised into a journey of faith, following Jesus as his disciple. Taylor's parents told me yesterday that she loves her bath, and certainly having some water poured over her will be a lot less painful than having a bottle of booze cracked over her head!

The baptism of Jesus

Today's Gospel reading was about the baptism of Jesus. It's only in Matthew's gospel that we read (in chapter 3 verse 14) about John the Baptist raising a question which I'm sure many of you have also wondered about: baptism is about washing away of sin, but since Jesus was without sin, why did he have to be baptised? Jesus gives a rather enigmatic answer:

Let it be so now; for it is proper for us in this way to fulfil all righteousness. (Matt 3:15 NRSV)

One explanation I read was that by being baptised Jesus was sanctifying the ceremony and giving an example to all his followers that they must also be baptised. One thing is certain: John the Baptist was giving people the chance to make a new start with God, to leave the past behind and reach out to a new life in fellowship with God.

For Jesus this was certainly true: he was leaving behind his life as a village carpenter and launching out on his mission to proclaim the good news of God's Kingdom by his teaching and by works of healing.

And in addition to being dunked by John in the Jordan, Jesus also had the experience of seeing the Holy Spirit descend on him in the form of a dove, to equip him with the power and the wisdom to carry out the mission that God had called him to. Equally significant are the words which Jesus heard from God:

This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased. (Matt 3:17)

If we look at Mark's and Luke's versions of this story, we will find that the words are addressed to Jesus specifically:

You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased. (Mark 1:11)

Most scholars think that Mark's Gospel was written first, and Matthew and Luke independently copied from it, adding their own material and emphases. Matthew's wording of the words from God at Jesus' baptism reflects his theme of Jesus' identity being revealed to the world, such as in the story of the Magi. The wording of Mark and Luke are likely to be what Jesus actually heard.

So I think we can take it that as far as Jesus was concerned, the words were addressed to him. In simple English, God is saying to him, You are my Son, I love you and I'm pleased with you. It's a great message of affirmation at the moment when Jesus is about to be launched on his mission.

You may or may not remember your baptism, but you may remember your confirmation, or another time when God spoke to you and called you to follow Jesus. The words which God the Father said of Jesus at his baptism are the same words which he says to you and me today: You are my son, or my daughter; I love you and I am well pleased with you. So sit up straight, walk tall, remember who you are! Through his Holy Spirit, God the Father gives us the assurance that we belong to him, that we are completely accepted and loved, no matter what may have happened in the past. We need to receive this message and know God's love for ourselves before we can share it with others.

Just as our baptism assures us of God's love and acceptance, so does the sacrament of Holy Communion. As you come to the altar each Sunday, Jesus offers you his body and blood in the bread and the wine, symbols of the amazing unconditional love he showed for us on the Cross. He invites us to receive him into our lives, to share intimately with him.

The mission of Jesus

What about the mission which Jesus was called to embark upon after his baptism? It can be summed up in the words of the prophecy from Isaiah 61:

The spirit of the Lord God is upon me,
because the LORD has anointed me;
he has sent me to bring good news to the oppressed,
to bind up the broken-hearted,
to proclaim liberty to the captives,
and release to the prisoners;
to proclaim the year of the LORD's favour... (Isaiah 61:1-2 NRSV)

You will recall that this was the passage which Jesus later read out in the synagogue in Nazareth (Luke 4:16-21), and that he concluded his reading by announcing that "Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing".

The mission of every Christian

Understanding what the baptism of Jesus meant for him is all very well, but what is even more important is to understand what it means for us. And this is where it gets personal. If Jesus was baptised as a model for us, then what was true for Jesus must also be true for everyone who is baptised in his name and who claims to be one of his followers. Not only are we individually loved by God as his sons and daughters, but he calls us to be part of the same mission that he gave to his Son.

You'll remember that at the end of Matthew's gospel, Jesus commissions his disciples to

Go ... and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. (Matthew 28:19-20 NRSV).

In other words, Jesus' mission is the mission of the church – it is our mission, and each of us who are called disciples of Jesus has a share in this mission. We are to

bring good news to the oppressed,
to bind up the broken-hearted,

to proclaim liberty to the captives,
and release to the prisoners;
to proclaim the year of the LORD's favour.

God is in the business of bringing healing and restoration to a broken world. At Jesus' baptism he was anointed with the Holy Spirit to do the same, and we too are called to be part of this mission. Each of us has a role to play. We can touch others with God's compassion and bring them encouragement and hope by a thoughtful action, a phone call or a visit. We can help to reconcile broken relationships by our prayers and our support. We can defend the oppressed by speaking up for a colleague at work who has been unjustly treated, and we can fight injustice in the wider world by writing a letter, shopping more ethically or giving money to charities who work to bring freedom for the exploited.

We can also bring the good news of God's love to other people by courageously sharing our testimony, using opportunities that God gives us to talk about Jesus, or inviting someone to a church service or event. As St Paul wrote in his letter to the Romans (10:14), how can people know about the love of God unless someone tells them? What makes the greatest difference to people coming to faith is the personal witness of someone they know. We all have something to share, and for someone this could change their life.

Response

I'd like us to have a few minutes to respond to this message. If you would like to receive a fresh filling with the Holy Spirit, take a moment of silence to remind yourself of God's fatherly love for you.

Let's pray.

Heavenly Father, thank you for your love for me.

I receive your love, freely and openly.

Lord Jesus, thank you for coming to the earth for me. Thank you for dying on the Cross to take away my sins, and for rising again to give me new life.

I receive your love, freely and openly.

Holy Spirit, thank you for being with me and in me. Fill me afresh, fill me to overflowing. Give me the assurance that I am loved, freely and unconditionally.

I receive your love, freely and openly.

Thank you. Amen.

Some questions to consider

- How do you feel about being called to be part of the mission of Jesus in the world?
- What encouragement have you heard in today's bible passages and this sermon?
- What do you think God wants us as St Michael's Church to concentrate on in 2020?

<u>The Everyday Faith Collect</u>	<u>Blessing</u>
Creator God, you made us all in your image: may we discern you in all that we see, and serve you in all that we do; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.	May the boldness of the Spirit transform you, may the gentleness of the Spirit lead you, may the gifts of the Spirit equip you to serve and worship God; and the blessing of God Almighty the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, be with you this Epiphany and always. Amen.