

Baptism and the Holy Spirit by Rev John Castle

A sermon given on Sunday 10th January 2021 at St Michael's Church, Sandhurst

Readings: Acts 19:1-7, Mark 1:4-11

Difficult to explain

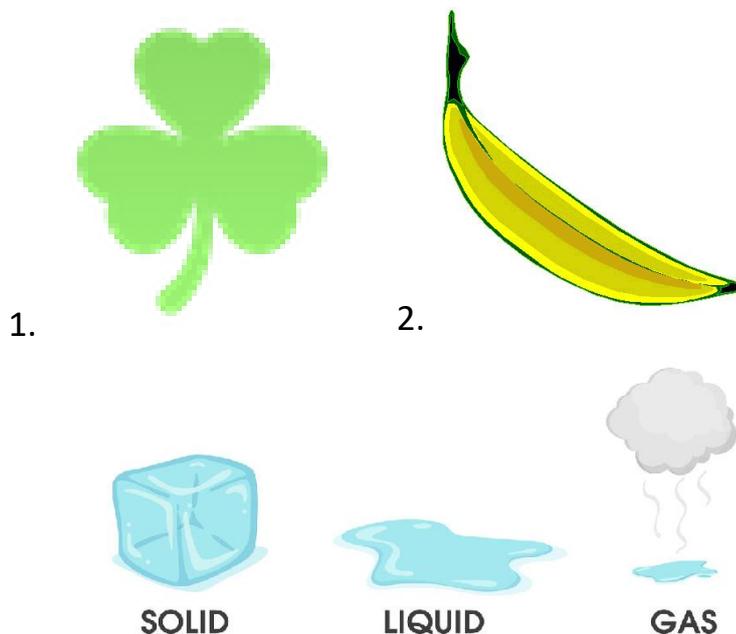
I have two questions for you to think about:

1. Which of these things do you think would be the most difficult to explain:

- A Zoom call to a member of a remote tribe in the Amazon?
- What falling in love is like to a 3-year-old?
- What colours are like to a person blind from birth?

I don't know if you've ever tried explaining any of these things. I had a go at the last one many years ago when I was a Management Trainee at the Greater London Council. One of my fellow trainees who I was chatting to at one of our sessions had been born blind. And somehow in conversation he asked me what colours were like. I thought for a moment and then said it was a bit like the sounds of different musical instruments. They might all play the same tune, but the quality of the sound each made was different.

2. What do these images all have in common?



3.

1 <https://iconsout.com/icons/clover> 3. <https://npwa.org/water-cycle/>

They are all attempts to illustrate the Holy Trinity: God as Father, Son and Holy Spirit, in 3 parts but all part of God; or 3 forms but the same substance. How would you explain – or describe – the Trinity to someone who asked you?

The Baptism of Jesus

The purpose of this sermon is not to explain the Trinity, but to see what we can learn from the Baptism of Jesus that is relevant to our lives. But we can't make much sense of the Baptism of Jesus without recognising that all three Persons of the Trinity are involved, which we'll see in a moment.

So let's start with Jesus, God's Son. In Mark's Gospel, this is the first time we see Jesus. Mark doesn't say anything about the birth of Jesus or his childhood. He opens the Gospel with the phrase "The beginning of the Good News of Jesus Christ, the Son of God, and then launches straight into the narrative about John the Baptist as the messenger God sent to prepare the way for Jesus the Messiah. And within a few verses Jesus comes down from Nazareth in the northern province of Galilee to the wilderness of Judaea, where John is baptising people in the River Jordan.

In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. And just as he was coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on him. And a voice came from heaven, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased." (Mark 1:9-11 NRSV)

Mark's style of writing is vivid and pacy. Whereas Matthew and Luke both say that heaven was opened and the Spirit descended on Jesus, Mark says that Jesus saw the heavens "torn apart". Something dramatic is happening. God the Holy Spirit comes down on God the Son, and God the Father speaks words of love and encouragement, affirming that Jesus the man is actually God's own beloved Son.

So what's all this about? Why does Jesus ask John to baptise him? After all, John's baptism is for repentance from sin, but what does Jesus need to repent of?

There are several things going on here. First of all, Jesus is humbling himself to receive John's ministry. By allowing John to plunge him under the water he is showing the humility that Paul writes about in the well-known passage from Philippians chapter 2, where we read that Jesus

emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death— even death on a cross. (Philippians 2:7-8 NRSV)

Later on, Christians came to see baptism a way of being united with Christ in his death and resurrection: going down into the water is a symbol of dying to self and coming up out of it is about rising to new life with Christ.

So by being baptised, Jesus is being a model for his followers who would be baptised in his name – including you and me. When we are baptised, we are identifying ourselves with Jesus, just as he identified himself with us.

But there is something else happening here. The word Messiah, or its Greek equivalent Christ, means “the anointed one.” In the Old Testament kings were anointed to show that they had begun their reign. Jesus’ baptism is a sort of anointing too, the point which marks the beginning of his ministry of preaching and healing after many years working as a carpenter. The anointing is not with water but with the Holy Spirit, who descends from heaven and rests on him. The miracles that Jesus will perform will be done by the power of the Spirit. The authoritative teaching that he will give will be inspired by the Spirit. His ability to understand people’s thinking and motives will come through the supernatural insight of the Holy Spirit. And the very next thing that happens to Jesus in verse 12 is that he is driven into the wilderness by the Spirit, where he is tempted by the Devil. Jesus is able to defeat evil and fulfil the mission that God the Father has given him by the power of the Spirit. Father, Son and Holy Spirit are united in their mission to the world.

Jesus is our model

Why is this relevant to us ordinary Christians? Because we are called to be like Jesus. We are his disciples, and our baptism is the moment that we are launched on our journey of faith and service, just like Jesus. If you were baptised as a baby you may not have been aware what you were embarking upon. But at some point in your life, if you consider yourself a follower of Jesus, you have recognised that Jesus has called you to be part of his mission. Maybe this was at your confirmation. Maybe it was a growing sense of God’s reality over a period of time, which resulted in you deciding to follow Jesus for yourself. Maybe there was a crisis point in your life when you gave up running away from God and surrendered your life to him.

However you came to be a follower of Jesus, a disciple, your baptism is the symbol of the grace of God that you have experienced, and of his calling to a new kind of life. And it is a token of the love that God has for you as his daughter or son, just as it was for Jesus as he heard those words from heaven “You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.”

But just like Jesus, we are not called to live the Christian life from our own resources. If Jesus needed the Holy Spirit to come upon him to empower him, how much more do we! The Holy Spirit is not just another bit of theology, which we could manage without. The Holy Spirit is the person of God active in the world, present with us, and living within us, if we invite him in.

There are many things which the Spirit does:

- He helps us to know that we are God’s precious sons and daughters, loved by our heavenly Father and accepted by him¹.
- He brings us healing for our inner hurts, and assurance that we are forgiven.

¹ Romans 8:15-16

- He enlightens our minds², helping us to understand what God is saying to us in the Bible, and how God wants us to live, giving us wisdom and insight to understand others and to speak to them on behalf of God.³
- He works within us to show us where we are going wrong, and to gently make us more like Jesus – confident, loving, humble, patient, self-controlled.⁴
- He equips us with gifts to enable us to serve him.⁵

We need the Holy Spirit if we are to follow Jesus and become like him. That's why in the passage from Acts chapter 19 Paul asked the believers in Ephesus if they had received the Holy Spirit. They knew about the baptism of repentance which John had practised, but they didn't seem to have heard the part of his message where he said that the one coming after him would baptise with the Holy Spirit. And so Paul laid hands on them and they received the Holy Spirit.

You can read about all these things that the Holy Spirit does in the Bible. But just knowing *about* the Holy Spirit is not enough. Think about the first question I asked you at the beginning of this talk, which was all about explaining something to people who had not experienced it for themselves. There are some things which you cannot know just by hearing someone explain them. You have to experience them for yourself. And your experience may not be the same as someone else's. It's like it says in the hymn which is often used at Confirmation services:

And so the yearning strong,
with which the soul will long,
shall far outpass the power of human telling;
for none can guess its grace,
till he become the place
wherein the Holy Spirit makes his dwelling⁶.

If we want to know who the Holy Spirit is, we need to let him come into our hearts and take up residence there. Then we will know what God's grace is, because we will experience it for ourselves.

But having the Holy Spirit inside us isn't a once-for-all experience. We need to keep on being filled with the Holy Spirit⁷, through prayer and worship. If we allow our minds and our time to be too taken up with worldly activities, worries and concerns, then we will gradually crowd the Holy Spirit out of our lives. And the result will be that we will lose the sense of God's closeness, and the assurance that we are God's sons and daughters. We will return to thinking according to worldly

² John 14:26, 16:13

³ Luke 12:12

⁴ Galatians 5:22-23

⁵ 1 Corinthians 12:4-11

⁶ *Come down, o love Divine* by Bianco da Siena (c. 1350-1434), translated by Richard Frederick Littledale (1833-1890)

⁷ Ephesians 5:18

values, and behaving according to worldly standards. We will become less like Jesus, rather than more.

Being filled with the Spirit

Today we stand at the beginning of a new year, facing uncertainty about the future and many challenges. Many people are filled with anxiety, or feeling alone. We have a growing national mental health crisis affecting people from children to the elderly. We need strength for ourselves, and strength and wisdom to help others. How we need the assurance, the peace and the wisdom that the Holy Spirit brings!

So why not take this opportunity today to remember the meaning of our baptism – that we are called to follow Jesus, that God looks on us as his precious, beloved daughters and sons, that he wants to make us more like his Son Jesus, and that the Holy Spirit is our Advocate and friend. The Holy Spirit doesn't force himself upon us. But if we make room for him, and welcome him into our hearts, he will come in and fill us, renew us, equip us and empower us to live as Jesus' disciples in the world.

So if you'd like to, I'm going to give you an opportunity to engage with God the Holy Spirit. I'm going to begin by reading a verse from the hymn I mentioned earlier. And then there will be a space of silence for you to talk to God yourself and tell him what is on your heart. And then I will lead in a prayer for us to be filled with the Holy Spirit.

Come down, O Love divine,
seek thou this soul of mine,
and visit it with thine own ardour glowing;
O Comforter, draw near,
within my heart appear,
and kindle it, thy holy flame bestowing.