

The Baptism of Christ

by Rev John Castle

A sermon given on Sunday 13th January 2019 at St Michael's Church, Sandhurst

Readings: **Isaiah 43:1-7; Luke 3:15-17, 21-22**

You can watch the Gospel episode (starting at Luke 3:1) from the *Jesus* film at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OVVP_ONDY1Q

Introduction: Self-esteem and self-worth

Take a few moments to consider these questions:

1. What makes you feel good about yourself?
Share with your neighbour.
2. What makes you feel bad about yourself?
(Optional whether you share this.)
3. How do you feel about the idea that you are a sinner?

Two more questions:

- *Does your self-esteem depend on your achievements, or the approval of others?*
- *Does your value as a person depend on these things?*

Please note that these are 2 different questions: the first is subjective (how we feel about ourselves), and the second is objective (our intrinsic worth). As consumers, we are encouraged to rate everything: our experience of a hotel, how well our phone call was handled by a call centre operator, etc; and we all tend to rate ourselves, either according to our performance or according to what other people think of us. But only God knows our true value.

The message of John the Baptist

We often think of John the Baptist as a rather tough, uncompromising character, a bit of a hell-fire preacher. After all, his words to the crowd aren't exactly intended to make himself friends:

'You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? (3:7)

We had a short time of reflection on this gospel passage in the Church Council meeting last Wednesday, and one member commented that hearing this read again helped her to realise the reason for John's message: he was giving people a chance to change. When people asked "What shall we do?" he gave them practical advice.

If a doctor sees a patient who is a heavy smoker and at risk of heart disease, it's not a bit of use saying, "You just carry on as you are. I'm sure things will work out OK". The patient needs to be challenged to change their lifestyle, otherwise they are going to be in serious trouble. The message "If you don't stop smoking now, you may not be here next year" might be tough and unwelcome, but the patient needs to hear it. The doctor isn't being unkind by pointing this out, but wants the best for the patient. There will be advice on how to quit, and how to change diet and take more exercise in order to live a healthier, happier life.

Facing where we're going wrong and being challenged to do something about it is vital if we are going to enjoy the kind of life God wants for us – a life in fellowship with him and in right relationship to other people. We may as well face the fact that we are sinners, which then enables us to recognise the changes we need to make in our attitudes and behaviour. John came promising people a new start, an opportunity to get right with God and put their lives in order, and preparing people to receive Jesus. As God's messenger, John was reaching out to his people so that they

might be reconciled to God and know his love. That is why, in spite of John's tough manner, Luke says that

with many other exhortations, he proclaimed the good news to the people. (3:18)

The Baptism of Jesus

Jesus came to John ready for a new start too. Of course, he didn't need to be baptised for the forgiveness of his sins, but his baptism marked the start of a new stage in his life, the beginning of his work of preaching and healing.

Two significant things happened to Jesus straight after he was baptised. One was hearing the voice of God his Father, saying

'You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.' (3:22)

Last week I showed children at St Michael's School the video of Jesus' baptism (from the *Jesus* film¹) and when I asked what Jesus heard God say, one child put it this way: "You're my son, I love you, and I'm proud of you". I think that captures it perfectly.

Whoever we are, and whatever we might achieve in life, we all need to know that we are loved. We've all had different experiences of family life. When you were a child, did you know that you were loved unconditionally, no matter how you behaved or what you achieved? Some parents are good at expressing this kind of love; others are not. I know that my own father did love me and was proud of me, but he wasn't very good at showing it. Later in life, aged 20, I needed someone to pray for me so that I could experience the overflowing, unconditional love of God as my heavenly Father. When someone did, my life was transformed.

The message of Isaiah in our first reading are so relevant here. Isaiah's message is to the people of Israel who were in exile as a result of their unfaithfulness towards God. But God's message in these chapters of Isaiah (beginning at chapter 40) is that the time for restoration has come. In spite of the past, God reminds them that they were created for his glory, and they are still precious and loved:

But now thus says the LORD,
he who created you, O Jacob,
he who formed you, O Israel:
Do not fear, for I have redeemed you;
I have called you by name, you are mine...

...you are precious in my sight,
and honoured, and I love you...

(Isaiah 43:1,4)

God's love for us does not depend on how good or moral we are. He's well aware of our failings and weaknesses. As St Paul wrote,

All have sinned, and fall short of the glory of God. (Rom 3:23)

He is our Creator, and he made us in his own image. He loves us, and wants to restore that image in us through his grace and love. That is why he sent Jesus to die on the Cross for our forgiveness and rise again to give us new life. That is what baptism is all about – a visible sign of God's love and mercy.

The Holy Spirit

But let's go back to Jesus' baptism. In addition to the voice from heaven, God the Father sent the Holy Spirit in the form of a dove on Jesus, to give him the power, the love and the wisdom to fulfil

¹ https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OVVP_ONDY1Q

the mission that God had assigned to him. In the same way, God gives us the Holy Spirit. Paul writes later in his letter to the Romans:

For you did not receive a spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received a spirit of adoption. When we cry, 'Abba! Father!' it is that very Spirit bearing witness with our spirit that we are children of God, and if children, then heirs, heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ. (Romans 8:15-17)

The Holy Spirit enables us to know that God is our Father who loves us unconditionally, not just with our heads, but in our hearts. He also works within us to make us more like Jesus, and empowers us to live the life that God has designed us to live.

When we know God's love for us like that, it makes all the difference to our self-esteem. It also helps us to cope with our own failures, receive forgiveness and be empowered to move on and do better, not in order to gain God's love, but because we know that we already have it, and want to show our love for him by living a life that pleases him.

Come, Holy Spirit

Do you know that God the Father loves you? Perhaps you know it in your head, but do you know it in your heart? Is his love real to you?

If you would like to be more sure of his love for you, take a few minutes to read these words to yourself, and let them sink in. They are words of God the Father himself.

"You are my beloved son/daughter. I am pleased with you".

"Do not fear, for I have redeemed you;
I have called you by name,
you are mine." *(Isaiah 43:1)*

Prayer (to be said slowly):

Father God, thank you for making me in your image and for your glory. I know that I often fail you and don't deserve your love. Thank you for loving me anyway. Thank you for sending Jesus to be my Saviour, taking my sins on himself on the Cross so that I could be forgiven. I want to know your love in a deeper, more personal way.

Holy Spirit, I open myself to you now. Fill me afresh, I pray. Cleanse me, renew me, restore me, heal me, empower me and fill me with love for you.

Thank you for answering my prayer. Thank you for filling me with your presence and your love. Help me to stay close to you today, tomorrow and every day. May my life bring you honour and pleasure. In Jesus' name I pray. Amen.

Summary of main teaching points

- All human beings are created in God's image, reflecting his nature and precious to him.
- We all sin and fall short of God's glory (Romans 3:23)
- God does not give up on us, but comes to redeem, restore and renew us in Jesus, who died and rose again for us. Baptism is the sacrament of this.
- Through the Holy Spirit, we can each know that we are God's sons and daughters (Romans 8:15-17), and can be enabled to live as such.