

## Readings for the Baptism of the Lord

12<sup>th</sup> January 2024

### First Reading: Isaiah 43:1-7

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. 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 Saviour. I give Egypt as your ransom, Ethiopia and Seba in exchange for you. Because you are precious in my sight, and honoured, and I love you, I give people in return for you, nations in exchange for your life. Do not fear, for I am with you; I will bring your offspring from the east, and from the west I will gather you; I will say to the north, 'Give them up,' and to the south, 'Do not withhold; bring my sons from far away and my daughters from the end of the earth – everyone who is called by my name, whom I created for my glory, whom I formed and made.'

### Second Reading: Acts 8:14-17

When the apostles at Jerusalem heard that Samaria had accepted the word of God, they sent Peter and John to them. The two went down and prayed for them that they might receive the Holy Spirit (for as yet the Spirit had not come upon any of them; they had only been baptised in the name of the Lord Jesus). Then Peter and John laid their hands on them, and they received the Holy Spirit.

### Gospel: St Luke 3:15-17,21-22

In the wilderness John proclaimed a baptism of repentance. As the people were filled with expectation, and all were questioning in their hearts concerning John, whether he might be the Messiah, John answered all of them by saying, 'I baptise you with water; but one who is more powerful than I is coming; I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandals. He will baptise you with the Holy Spirit and fire. His winnowing-fork is in his hand, to clear his threshing-floor and to gather the wheat into his granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire.'

Now when all the people were baptised, and when Jesus also had been baptised and was praying, the heaven was opened, and the Holy Spirit descended upon him in bodily form like a dove. And a voice came from heaven, 'You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.'

## A Reflection for the Baptism of the Lord

Who are you?

When we're introduced to someone, we would usually start with our name, and it's a useful handle to distinguish us from the next person. Although, even if we have quite an unusual name, in this internet age it's quite easy to discover that we're not the only person who has our name...

A name is a useful handle, but it doesn't really say much about who we are. When asked who we are, we are more likely to define ourselves by our job or role in society, or by our relationships – I'm a teacher, he's the Captain of the golf club, she's so-n-so's daughter. That says a bit more about us but, even if we go into quite a bit of detail, it only says a little of who we are. And things aren't always quite as they appear to be anyway.

A few years ago, I helped take the funeral of a dear friend who I'd known for about the last 10 years or so of her life. Hers had been a long and full life, 97 years; she had worked for a bank, brought up a family, worked again for the probation service. A woman of strong faith, involved in her local church, as well as amateur dramatics and so on. In some ways, an unremarkable life, although she was a remarkable person. She was a great listener, and you always knew your confidences were safe with her. And there was quite a good reason for that...

At her funeral, Meg's coffin was draped in the Union Flag, as a former officer of the Secret Intelligence Service, later MI6. Recruited in 1942 at the age of 21, and trained at the now famous Bletchley Park, she had worked in the visa section of embassies around the world...and kept her ear to the ground...until she left in 1951 to get married.

It was not quite the back story you expected when you first met this vivacious, white-haired old lady. For many years, even her family had no idea. Once she was released from the official secrets act, 60 years after the end of WWII, the truth was only gradually revealed, and probably not all of it at that.

In today's Gospel reading, more of the truth about Jesus is revealed. During this season of Epiphany, our Gospel readings relate the occasions in his life when something of the identity of Jesus is revealed to the world – not the whole picture but a little more of it.

In Luke's account of Jesus' baptism, there are two witnesses to Jesus' identity. The first is John the Baptist. The people were speculating that John might be the Messiah, but he was quick to disabuse them. His baptism was a baptism with water for repentance, to bring the people back to God, as the prophets had tried to do repeatedly throughout Israel's history. He was to prepare them for the one who would come after him, who would baptise them with the Holy Spirit and with fire. John the Baptist does not specifically identify Jesus here as the one to follow him, that is stated more explicitly in John's Gospel.

Although the moment of Jesus baptism is not described by Luke, as it is in the Gospels of Matthew and Mark, it is referred to. Here, the humanity of Jesus is emphasised. Although Jesus was without sin, and therefore did not need a baptism of repentance, by being baptised he identified fully with the human condition of being sinners in need of repentance and forgiveness.

The second witness to Jesus' identity is God himself. As Jesus is praying after his baptism, first of all the heavens open, a sign of divine revelation. Then the Holy Spirit descended on him - Luke says in bodily form to emphasise the reality of it. And it is God who says: 'You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.' - Jesus' divinity, as God's Son, is clearly stated, as is God's love for him and his pleasure in him.

A short passage, but packed full of revelation about Jesus' identity: his humanity and his divinity, that he is God's son, loved and valued, that he is filled with the Holy Spirit and will in turn baptise with the Holy Spirit.

Our baptism also says quite a lot about our identity. At baptism, we become children of God, co-heirs with Christ. As that wonderful verse at the beginning of the passage from Isaiah says: 'I have called you by name, you are mine.'

Isaiah also reminds us that we too are precious in God's sight, that God loves us and that we were created for God's glory and redeemed, not because we are worthy but because God loves us. We are each called to be a child of God and uniquely identified as God's people. In baptism, we each receive an identifying mark – the sign of the cross – and are sealed by the gift of the Holy Spirit.

The gift of the Holy Spirit also reminds us that part of our identity, as baptised Christians, is in a Christian community. In the passage we heard from Acts, we are told that Peter and John went to the Samaritans, prayed for them and they received the Holy Spirit. In receiving the Holy Spirit, they became part of the community of believers along with those in Jerusalem; there was no difference.

Christian community is important – we need each other, to nurture one another, so that we grow as individuals and as a community. So, in our baptism liturgy, when the candidate or their godparents make the profession of faith and their commitment to the Christian life, these are affirmed by the congregation: 'This is our faith...', 'this is our task...'

And just as Jesus' baptism came at the beginning of his ministry, so our baptism is not an end in itself but should mark the beginning of a lifetime of growing into our unique identities as God's people. That is accomplished through the work of the Holy Spirit within us, here and now, in the places and among the people where we live and work, equipping us for the journey.

Our identity as Christians is not so much a question of 'who are you?' Rather 'whose are you?'

Whose are you? The account of Jesus' baptism reveals more of who he is, God's Son, the Beloved, with whom God is well-pleased. In our own baptismal journeys through life, we learn more of who Jesus is, and of who and whose we are, until at the last, all will be revealed. As Paul says elsewhere, in his first letter to the Corinthians: 'For now we see in a mirror dimly, but then we will see face to face. Now I know only in part; then I will know fully, even as I have been fully known.'

My friend, the spy, may have worked for MI6 and had her unexpected side, but, above all, she knew herself, and was known, as a dearly loved child of God.