

Baptism of the Lord

The Baptism of Jesus is a great place to begin to know who Jesus is. As the story is told to us today, we hear what Luke has to say about him. We listen to how John the Baptist describes him. We are privileged to hear what God himself says about his son.

Luke paints a particular portrait of Jesus. We begin to notice today some of the colours he uses in that portrait. But our ears are open first to what John the Baptist is saying about Jesus. Some people were beginning to think that John was the Christ, the anointed one of God for whom Israel was awaiting. John makes it clear that he is not the Christ. “I baptise you with water, but someone is coming, someone who is more powerful than I am, and I am not fit to undo the strap of his sandals; he will baptise you with the Holy Spirit and fire.”

As we make our way through Luke’s gospel this year, we will notice that the Holy Spirit plays a big part in everything that Jesus will do. Next Sunday we will listen as the Spirit of God drives Jesus out into the desert to be tested. When Jesus begins his public ministry, he will quote from the Prophet Isaiah, “The Spirit of the Lord has been given to me.” Luke speaks to us about Jesus in this way because he wants to reinforce something that is so essential about who we are as followers of Jesus, of who we are as Church. We can only follow Jesus; we

can only make him present in our world as members of his Church by the power of the Spirit. It is the Spirit of God that empowers us to be Church.

We might be surprised at the way that Luke tells the story of Jesus Baptism. He does not name John as having any part in the baptism. Luke describes what happened for Jesus as a profound experience of his prayer. As we read through Luke’s gospel this year, we are going to notice that every key moment in the life of Jesus ministry flows from a time of prayer. While Jesus was at prayer, “heaven opened, and the Holy Spirit descended on him in bodily shape, like a dove.

There is rich symbolism here. We might recall how the Prophet Isaiah prayed that the heavens be torn open so that God could come down and dwell among his people again. Here we see it happening. The symbolism of the dove can remind us of the creation story, or when God began again with Noah after the flood. Maybe Luke is just wanting us to know how real that prayer experience of Jesus was to help us to hold onto what we experience in our times of prayer.

Now it is time to listen in to what God the Father says about Jesus. “And a voice came from heaven, ‘You are my Son, the Beloved; my favour rests on you.’” Here we get a glimpse of that unique relationship of love that is

God. Throughout the gospel we are going to listen to the way that Jesus lives out that relationship of love, being faithful to all that God calls him to be.

When we listen to what is said about Jesus, we not only learn about him, but we also learn about ourselves. The Baptism of Jesus gives us the opportunity to reclaim what it means to be in communion with Jesus through our baptism. Perhaps we might remember first how important prayer is for us. It seems to me that it is only when we are trying to be open to God in prayer that we see the truth of who we really are. It is only when we allow the Lord to speak to us that we know that like Jesus we are God's beloved sons and daughters. It is only when we take time to be still in God's presence that we hear God saying to us that his favour rests upon us. Like Jesus we know that we cannot make important decisions about ourselves and those we love without bringing those decisions before God in prayer. Like Jesus we know that we need the wisdom and the guidance of the Holy Spirit to make the best decisions that we can make.

And when we made those decisions, we know that we will need the power of the Holy Spirit to carry them out with love. We can do nothing good without God's help. But we can do more good than we can imagine when we let God work through us.

Something of what we read today from the Prophet Isaiah touched me. "Say to the towns of Judah 'Here is your God.' Here is the Lord coming with power, his arm subduing all things to him. He is like a shepherd feeding his flock, gathering lambs in his arms, holding them against his breast and leading to their rest the mother ewes." For me it is a description of a God who is on our side. It is a description of a powerful but very gentle God: A God who has been revealed to us by Jesus. It is a God who cares first for each of us and then through us longs to reach out to others.