

Baptism of Christ. 10.1.21. St. George's. Genesis 1: 1-5. Acts 19: 1-7. Mark 1: 4-11.

May I speak in the name of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

I want to begin by wishing you all a very happy New Year, and I'm sure we all hope that it is a better year than the last one! At the beginning of a new year, we often make new year resolutions and we promise ourselves that things will be different – that WE will be different.

Some of the top resolutions are; to exercise more, to lose weight, to learn a new skill or hobby and to stop smoking. But even if we don't make any resolutions, we often think of a new year as a fresh start and a new beginning.

The readings this morning are all about new beginnings. The Old Testament reading is from Genesis - the first 5 verses of the Bible! Verses that I'm sure we are very familiar with and yet do we stop and consider the enormity of them?

'In the beginning there was nothing – and God created the heavens and the earth, light and darkness!' We should be so overwhelmed with awe and wonder when we read these verses. It was a fresh start, a new beginning - the beginning of a plan that God was putting in place.

We have heard a lot about God's plan recently. We have just celebrated the birth of Christ and given thanks that God sent his son to earth to live a human life among us.

Jesus was revealed to the Jewish shepherds in Bethlehem, and then to the wise men from a country far away, symbolising that Jesus was coming for the whole world! And he was revealed to Anna and Simeon in the temple. God's great plan was unfolding.

We are now in the church season of 'Epiphany' which means 'Revealing' and today we have another revealing as we read about Christ's baptism.

We don't know much about Jesus' early years and this week's Gospel reading has jumped ahead to Jesus as a young man who is probably now about 30 years old, and we read about this encounter with his cousin John the Baptist.

John is baptising people in the river Jordan as an act of repentance, to ask God to forgive their sins. John has been predicting the coming of the Messiah so he wants them to get ready for when Jesus comes.

He is trying to make sure they are living in the right way and he is telling the people that he isn't the one they've been waiting for, but that someone more powerful is coming.

This account in Mark's Gospel is not as detailed as the one in Matthew, but we can imagine Jesus coming along and striding into the water and asking John to baptise him along with everyone else.

Jesus comes humbly before John and in doing so, he identifies with the people – he stands alongside the people as one of them, just as he stands alongside us.

Again, in Matthew's gospel we are told that John is shocked that Jesus wants to be baptised by him. This is the messiah whom John has been preaching about, the one who is coming to lead them and to save them! And John says, 'It should be the other way round!'. 'You ought to be baptising me!' But Jesus insists – 'No, let it be this way for now.'

So John agrees to baptise Jesus and we can imagine him pushing him down under the water. But when Jesus comes up out of the water, something amazing happens.

The Gospel writer describes it in the best way he can – like the heavens being opened, and the Spirit of God coming down on Jesus like a dove resting on him. A dove symbolises peace, and it shows that God’s kingdom will not come in a warlike way, but in a peaceful way.

And then a voice is heard as God speaks and Jesus is revealed as God’s Son. This marks the beginning of Jesus’ ministry and he has come to fulfil God’s plan and the promises God made centuries before.

And these are promises which will see God’s spirit cover the whole world, bringing God’s forgiveness and love - and Jesus could only do this by standing alongside God’s people, by living our life - and ultimately dying our death.

So that tiny, vulnerable baby, born in a stable, is now at the beginning of his work on earth – the work of showing God’s love to the world and his baptism is where he receives the strength and the power of the Holy Spirit which he needs if he is to carry on with God’s plan.

Baptism was obviously very important to Jesus, and it was obviously very important to Paul as we heard in the reading from the book of Acts.

That’s why Baptism is very important to us as Christians. And with this example of Jesus’ baptism, our own baptisms take on a special meaning. Baptism is an outward sign of an inner grace and it identifies us with God’s son.

Our own baptism brings us into the family of the church – and it’s the only way we become members of the church and it’s where we ask the Holy Spirit to take part in our lives.

By baptism we are included in God’s mission and just as Jesus’ baptism was just the beginning of his ministry, so our baptisms are just the beginning for us as we travel on our journey of faith and discipleship.

And as we are reminded of our baptism, we have the opportunity to commit ourselves once again to the Christian life, which is essentially a life of service to God. We are not called to solve all the world’s problems, but each of us has our own calling – in our families, in our work and in our world. And we all need the help of the Holy Spirit to be able to be faithful to that call.

Just as we read about Jesus being filled with the Holy Spirit at his baptism and the wind of God which we heard about in the Genesis reading - the breath of God that brings new life is present in all of us, transforming and encouraging us.

If we allow God’s Holy Spirit to work in us and give us strength and confidence, we will truly be the body of Christ - agents of God and we can make a difference.

John the Baptist was surprised that Jesus came to him for baptism and part of the challenge of this passage is for us to learn again to be surprised by Christ. That God has plans for us – which are not always the same as the plans we have for ourselves!

God has a purpose for each of us and as God works through us, we come to know a loving God, who wants what’s best for his children.

We have a God who supports us and guides us as we continue on our journey of faith and discipleship – and that’s a journey that will take us the whole of our lives.

Amen.