

Epiphany 1 B. St Stephen's. 9.30am. Mark 1: 4-11
10.1.21

In those days Jesus came from Nazareth in Galilee
and was baptised by John in the Jordan. (v9)

That is a simple statement of fact which it
would be easy to note and then pass on without
realising its significance. Rather like the old crofter
whose minister visited to arrange the baptism of his
child.

"Are you prepared for the baptism?" he asked
the father.

"Aye! I've a grand ham for dinner," came the
answer.

"No, no!" said the minister. "I mean, have you
spiritually prepared?"

"Aye, that too," said the father. "I've a quart
jar from the inn."

What lies behind that simple statement is the
claim that in Jesus we meet with God; that in him, we
see the divine nature and also an authentic human
life.

If you have difficulty with that statement, you
are not alone. Most of the arguments in the early
Church centred on the nature of Christ's being. The
Arian heresy denied the divinity of Christ, whilst the
Gnostics his humanity. Today, I'm led to believe that
the Jehovah's witnesses liken Jesus to an angel.

The Nicene Creed which we say every Sunday, labours the belief that in Jesus, both divinity and humanity meet: "very God of very God, begotten not made, of one substance with the Father and was incarnate, made man, suffered, died and rose."

The theme of today's readings is the baptism of Jesus. He appears at the Jordan as a mature man, the first we've heard of him since he was 12. It's fair to assume that he has been preparing himself physically, spiritually and mentally for this moment. He chose to come to John who was the voice crying in the wilderness: "prepare the way of the Lord, clear a straight path for him," echoing the words of Isaiah, and calling the people to repentance.

The baptism of Jesus was a moment of great significance for the Jewish people, though few recognised this, and also for the world's salvation. This should have been the moment when the hopes and longings of Israel were to be realised with the fulfilment of God's promises. Only Mathew's gospel tells of the visit of the Magi to the stable; but all four gospels record the baptism of Jesus, underlining the importance of this moment.

John was clearly aware that he was the forerunner and not the promised Messiah, which he acknowledged when he refused at first to baptise Jesus; but Jesus insisted, telling John, as St Matthew records, that it was fitting. Was Jesus wanting to identify himself with John's call for renewal? Was it

also an identification with humanity? Whatever the reason, its rightness was made clear as Jesus came out of the water, and saw the heavens opened and the Spirit of God, like a dove, descend on him, and the voice saying; “This is my Son”.

So Jesus is the fulfilment of the hopes and longings of Israel, who will bring justice to the nations, spoken of by Isaiah, “when the eyes of the blind will be opened, and the prisoner set free.” In that acknowledgment of Jesus by God, the whole of humanity is lifted to a higher plain, making it now possible for us to share in the divine nature in a more intimate way.

The blind seeing and the prisoner going free, could be literally true; but equally, they are metaphorically true as well as people have their vision enlarged and are set free from rigid convention and false teaching.

Do you remember the atmosphere at the time of the millennium? There was a sense of longing that the new age would bring with it a more hopeful, less antagonistic society. Sadly, things went the other way, and the place where those hope could be realised have been rejected by so many.

And yet the gospel is able to break through the indifference and bring new life. Do you remember a local Pentecostal minister, Bob Miles? He had been a tear-away, yet found Christ and it changed his life.

And in America, Nicky Cruz, who'd be a hoodlum, turned to Christ and went on to convert many gang members. There was also Tom Kelly from the IRA and James Tate from the UVF, both in prison in Belfast for murder and violence, and both wanting to break out and find a better way. Together they later worked together to try to bridge the divide between the two communities.

The power of the gospel to open blind eyes and release people from false ideas is as powerful today as it ever was. But that power has to be made manifest through the witness of God's people – through you and me. In our baptism, not only were we made children of God, but we were also commissioned in his service. As we know, so many of those who come for baptism don't appear again until they marry or die.

This failure is marked by the story of three priests who met for coffee and complained about the problem of bats. One said he took a shotgun, which did nothing to the bats but made holes in the roof. The second said he managed to collect them all, drove 50 miles and let them go, but they beat him back to church. The third said that he hadn't had any problems – he'd baptised and confirmed them and they hadn't been seen since, (which should make us question how we care for the newly baptised and their families).

We often bemoan the fact that we seem to have little impact on society. But I do wonder if, under the providence of God, much more is going on than we realise. As I pointed out recently, a great deal is going on quietly round the country and in Guernsey to meet the needs of people and to open to them the truth of the gospel – through food banks, street pastors, credit unions, through the work of the Church Urban Fund and the like.

We each have a part to play, and I suspect that we have more influence on others by the way we behave than by our words – though words at the right moment are essential. As St Francis said: “Use every means possible to preach the gospel – if you must, use words.”

St Lynas, Frank Pagden’s sort of monk, had a hectic day chasing around delivering and collecting things.

On the way home late in the evening, he and his colleagues called at a fish and chip shop. As they were eating this in the minibus, St Lynas said:

“You know, our Lord spent his time going about doing good. It strikes me that we settle to often for just going about!”

