

10 January 2016 St Peter & St Paul, Luke 3:15-17 & 21-22

Father, may these spoken words be faithful to your written word and lead us to the living Word, Jesus Christ our Lord. **Amen**

The theme of our readings today, as with every first Sunday after the Epiphany, is the baptism of Jesus. However, this year, the focus is less on Jesus, and more on how God's people are invited to participate in the baptism and to receive God's Spirit. In the Gospel, Luke reminds his readers of John's prediction that Jesus is the one who will baptise them in the Holy Spirit. But it is not just about Jesus; it is also an acknowledgment that God is still at work in the world, and still invites us to participate in his saving and liberating work. But, to do this, we, like Jesus, will need to be strengthened and empowered. We will need to be baptised in the Holy Spirit.

With many words Luke has told us of the births of John the Baptist and Jesus. Now with very few words he shifts from the end of John's preaching mission to the beginning of Jesus' public ministry. The pivotal point is Jesus' baptism. The people are wondering if John might be the Christ, but John lets them know that one more powerful is coming, one empowered by the Holy Spirit. John's ministry of preparation for the Messiah ends with his imprisonment by Herod. The beginning of Jesus' ministry is marked by his baptism, not described here but merely reported in one half of verse 21: "Now when all the people were baptized, and when Jesus also had been baptized".

According to Luke all we know about the baptism of Jesus is that it was with "all the people" – but maybe that is what the church has sometimes forgotten. Jesus presented himself for baptism as an act of solidarity with a nation and a world of sinners. Jesus simply got in line with everyone who had been broken by "the wear and tear" of this selfish world and had all but given up on themselves and their God. At his baptism, Jesus identified with the damaged and broken people who needed God.

It is a question worth asking whether our churches truly identify with sinners and are willing to get in line with them, to welcome them and work for them as brothers and sisters in Christ. The church may say all the right words, declaring that we are refuges for those who have lost their way, but too often we may send the message that respectable, successful people are the ones we need to build up our communities.

Jesus' baptism reminds me of a story about Corrie ten Boon's father Caspar. You may have heard of Corrie ten Boon. She belonged to a Dutch Christian Family. Her grandfather Wilhelm ten Boon started a weekly prayer group in 1844 in the city of Haarlem, near Amsterdam for the salvation of the Jews. This weekly prayer meeting amazingly continued uninterrupted until 1944 when the ten Boon family were sent to a concentration camp for hiding Jews to save them from the holocaust. When the Jews were forced to wear the "Star of David," Casper too lined up for one. He wore it because he wanted to identify himself with the people for whom he and his family had been praying for all those years. He was prepared to be so completely identified with the Jews that he was willing to wear a sign of shame and suffer persecution for the sake of the people he loved. He didn't have to wear the Star but chose to. Jesus got in line with sinners and was baptised with them; not because he needed to but because he loves us so much, he is baptised to identify himself with us, just as Caspar ten Boon wore the yellow star to identify himself with the Jews he loved so much.

In Luke Jesus doesn't say a single word out loud at his baptism, but after he is baptised, he prays. Jesus is not only coming to us as sinners; he is coming to God in prayer. He will not undertake his public ministry of teaching and healing in his own power and abilities. The source of his strength will be beyond himself. As he prays the Holy Spirit descends upon him and will encourage him all the way, even when that way becomes difficult.

In every community, in every life, there is a need for resources that are beyond our human capacity. Maintaining faithful marriages, keeping families strong, resisting the siren call of greed, addiction, immediate gratification, and personal satisfaction, and making a contribution to those around us in need, all require more of us than we are capable of giving on our own. However, even as God calls us to live with integrity and wholeness, he enters our world and gives us his Spirit to help us to do it. Jesus' act of being baptised is the assurance of his commitment to partner with us, and is the invitation for us to participate in the work of God's reign. The promise of God's Spirit to empower us, and the gift of God's living word to challenge, guide and strengthen us, assures that we have all the resources we need to participate in God's work.

Again, it is worth considering whether our churches depend upon the Holy Spirit and our connection to God in prayer for the spiritual stamina to go into the world and make a difference in people's lives through Christ. This connection remains the lifeline of every disciple, every congregation and every ministry. We should

also remember that at our own baptism we too receive the Holy Spirit but that the Holy Spirit only becomes active in our lives as we seek God's will and obey his guidance. It is significant that this intensely spiritual experience following Jesus's baptism happens while he is praying.

Identifying with sinners in the waters of baptism and holding onto God in prayer, Jesus is now claimed as God's Son. 'You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.' At his baptism, Jesus is ordained as Messiah by the God who loves him and tells him so. This powerful affirmation from God, sustains Jesus through temptation in the desert and then through the joys and trials of faithful ministry. In the reading from Isaiah we heard too how God says, 'Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are mine.'

This is all about relationship; relationship with God is something we have because of God's love for us. If we were to think of the moment when we were most ashamed, where we felt more lost than we ever had. It is in this exact moment when God says to us, what he said to his people so many years ago. "You are precious in my sight, and honoured, and I love you... Do not fear, for I am with you."

We too need to hear this affirmation from God, and we need to hear it from each other. These are life-giving words that every human being should hear: 'You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.' When Jesus heard those words, they changed his life forever. They will do the same for us, our children, our spouses, our neighbours, our congregations, and, as Jesus promised, even our enemies.

Luke used very few words to share with us the baptism of our Lord. But those few words should lead us to identify with all people, to depend upon God in prayer for strength to live and to love, and to hear the affirmation of our God as the source of our calling and purpose in life.

As we go forward in this New Year, may God's powerful affirmation sustain us in our lives and in our calling:

'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... Do not fear, for I am with you.'

'You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.'

In Jesus name, Amen.