

One of the slightly odd things about the Church calendar is that the baby Jesus grows up very quickly: we celebrate his birth on December 25th and the visit of the wise men to the stable in Bethlehem on January 6th, the Feast of Epiphany.

Well, here we are, just a few days after the Feast of Epiphany, and here in our gospel reading is the adult Jesus, striding off into the desert to find his cousin, John the Baptizer. This is Jesus' first appearance in public as an adult: presenting himself to John for the baptism of repentance.

John the Baptizer appeared on stage, as it were, back at the beginning of Advent in his prophetic role. John is the one who preaches in thunderous tones that it is time for repentance and a return to the covenant relationship with God. In summary, that means loving the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul and with all your mind, and loving your neighbour as yourself. In John's view, this call to repentance is urgent because these are the last days of life on earth as the people have known it: The Messiah is coming.

That was the John the Baptizer we met during Advent, just before Christmas, but here, today, we see John in another role. To those who believed John and repented – and there were great crowds of them – he administered a ritual washing in rivers and streams, a sign of their repentance from sin and return to the covenant between God and his people.

Now, why on earth would Jesus go out into the wilderness to be baptized with this ritual cleansing of repentance and return? After all, if Jesus is who we say he is, he is the Son of God who was 'in every way as we are, except without sin', as one of our Eucharistic prayers puts it.

We believe that Jesus is the Saviour, Christ the Lord, who takes the burden of our sins into his own sinless life and puts them to death when he himself dies on the cross. Surely, Jesus did not need a baptism of repentance to mark the beginning of his adult public life and ministry? So, what is going on here?

There are complex historical and theological responses to these questions. The crux of it is, in the words of St Paul to the Corinthians, 'God was in Christ, reconciling the world to himself...' To put it another way: in everything that Jesus says and does, God is at work, showing us how closely and intimately God relates to human beings, who do sin and who do need to repent and turn again to loving God with the whole of our being, and loving our neighbour as ourself.

Jesus stands in the river Jordan, just as he lay in the manger as a baby, just as he will hang on the cross at his death. Jesus does all of this because God is in Christ, identifying himself with us in every aspect of our births, lives and deaths. God is in solidarity with us. This Jesus is, we say, 'Emmanuel', which means 'God with us'. God is for us and God is with us, especially in the depths of our sin, especially in our deepest need for repentance, especially when we feel far from God.

So, Jesus does not hesitate to join the crowd of sinners at the River Jordan who are repenting and returning to a right relationship with God. No, Jesus does not need to repent. But, by recounting his baptism by John, the gospel writers show Jesus doing what God in Christ always does: God stands by us, God stands with us, God stands for us in our great need.

That is the good news of the gospel. And that is why the scene of Jesus' baptism includes a 'theophany', a manifestation of God. It is as though God is so excited and joyful about Jesus' first public act of solidarity with sinners, that God rips through the very fabric of creation with the authoritative word of God's voice saying, 'You are my Son, the beloved.'

The new creation in Christ is thus identified with the original creation called into existence by the same voice and word of God. Remember our first reading from the Book of Genesis in which we heard, ‘God said, “Let there be light”; and there was light. And God saw that the light was good.’ It is as though here at Jesus’ baptism by John God is saying, ‘this is the very flesh and blood of my covenant with you, standing here in obedient solidarity with you. And this is good.’

Then comes the sign of the Holy Spirit, the small flying dove which comes to rest on Jesus as light as ‘a feather on the breath of God,’ to borrow a phrase from Hildegard of Bingen. This is the very same Spirit, the wind, who was brooding over the face of the waters at the beginning of creation.

And when Noah was anxiously waiting out the great flood in his legendary ark, it was this gentle flying dove who winged its way back with an olive branch in its beak, giving our ancestors the pledge of a peaceful, fruitful dry earth.

Now, the dove graces the scene of Jesus’ baptism with a small pledge of the glorious fullness of divine energy. The same energy who nudges us into repentance and sustains us in the new creation.

But, why did God choose baptism to demonstrate his solidarity with us? Why use water?

Water is ambivalent. Too much water causes flooding, too little water causes drought. Without water we cannot live, but we can’t live in it either, we drown.

Going down into the water is a symbol, a symbol not just of cleansing, but also of the final surrender of death. By the same token, coming up out of the water is a sign of rebirth and a symbol of resurrection. This is a preview of the pattern of the work and ministry of Jesus – life is achieved by offering himself in death.

When we are baptised, we are called to take Jesus as the model for our own lives, to take on this pattern of dying and rising, allowing God to change us. This process is what we call ‘conversion.’ It involves the ‘death of self’, a movement away from self-preoccupation, a movement away from selfishness, a movement that enables us identify with those around us, to weep with those who weep, to rejoice with those who rejoice, to reach out to help and serve those around us. There is no limit to the rich experience of meeting with other people when we put our own personal worries to one side.

Our own baptisms have much more to do with Jesus’ death and resurrection than they do with this scene of the two cousins at the River Jordan. But, that is for us to ponder later on, during Lent, as we approach Easter. Meanwhile, we give thanks for this most gracious incarnation of God in Christ, this one who stands faithfully with us and lovingly for us, as we learn, the hard way, to embrace a repentant life, loving God above all else and always seeking the best for others rather than just for ourselves.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.