

THE BAPTISM OF CHRIST

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Genesis 1:1-5, Ps.29, Acts19:1-7, Mark 1:4-11.

Today's gospel is a feast of colourful and yet almost unlikely images. There is the strange, wild personality of John the Baptist.... Perhaps one of the most colourful personalities in Holy Scripture! He lived a solitary life in the desert, with camel's hair clothing and surviving on a diet of locusts and wild honey! The historians think he came from Nazareth, and if so, by tradition, his hair would never have been cut. In those times, and today, he would be considered an eccentric. His message was not a comforting one, because he called people to confess their sins, and be ready to live new lives. He challenged the religious authorities, calling them a brood of snakes (which can't have enhanced his popularity) and when he announced the coming of Jesus to the crowd, he warned them that Jesus' baptism would be a baptism of fire.

The people who came to be baptized by John were so desperate about the condition of their souls, that they were willing to go out to a man as strange as John was. They were the 'sinners', or so it seemed... the tax collectors, the prostitutes, the people condemned by society as a whole, some of them had incurable diseases, and were alienated from society... many of them were ordinary people, just like us. And then we see this truly strange event: Jesus comes to join them...Jesus, who, we would assume, doesn't need to be baptized! And when John baptizes Jesus, amazing things happen! There is a splitting open of the sky.... A voice thunders from heaven, revealing Jesus as God's Son, and there is a swooping down of the Holy Spirit upon Jesus. Those who were present saw this as being like the swirling, downward movement of a dove. This flight of the Dove, while it may allude to the bird-like hovering of the creative Spirit of God over the chaotic waters in the Genesis passage we just read, also reminds us of the Dove in Genesis 8:11....this dove, we remember, was sent out by Noah as the flood waters begin to recede.. and the dove returns to Noah with the olive branch in its beak as a signal from God of a new beginning for creation... a new promise... and of course this is what Jesus' baptism at the Jordan means for humankind. (The Jordan River also holds deep significance for the people of Israel... they had to cross it to reach the Promised Land). Today for all Christian people, Jordan water still holds a special importance. My aunt who used to live in Wales, went to the Holy Land many years ago and returned with a large bottle of Jordan Water, which she hoped the priest would use to baptize her grandchildren. I remember that the family teased her about this water and insisted that it should be boiled and strained before being poured on the children's heads!! And each time there was a baptism in that family, the Holy Water was scooped up out of the font and saved for the next grandchild!!

Back to the story in the Gospel... the split sky, the Dove, and the Voice from Heaven (see Ps 29 too) are very important images; they are all for Jesus, and also for **us** to see, because they show how God invades his broken creation with amazing Power, and Love. The opening of the heavens is a sign of God revealing himself, and through the human consciousness of Jesus, he reveals himself to the world. The Dove shows us the love, peace, and the Spirit of God which surround Jesus...and the voice identifies Jesus as Son of God, so that this becomes a moment of special revelation, and the first

time the TRINITY is revealed, in the persons of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. In his baptism, Jesus shows us that he identifies with all of humankind, that he is willing to share with us in our need for repentance, to submit to the symbolic pouring and cleansing of life-giving water. And of course, in saying YES to God's purpose for him, and in receiving the anointing of the Holy Spirit, Jesus stands at a new cross-roads in his journey, as God the Father lays on him both a MISSION to the world, and a message of the good news of the Kingdom of God which he has come to bring. And all the Gospels tell us that no sooner has Jesus received this new empowering at his Baptism, than he goes out into the desert, *driven by the Spirit*, to confront the Devil. We are shown that Jesus is sent to defeat Satan in his own territory.

The Dove is an important symbol for Christians, of the Holy Spirit. It is often shown in the works of artists down the ages, to indicate the presence of God. It is also the symbol of peace, innocence, and gentleness. We have a beautiful window in our Church, created by Ethel Kotze, depicting the Dove. Sometimes the old paintings of doves would have seven rays proceeding from the wings of the dove, reflecting the seven gifts of the Holy Spirit: **Counsel, or guidance, Fear of the Lord (reverence), Fortitude, (courage), Piety (devotion), Understanding, Wisdom, and Knowledge.** We may not often see such real images when the Holy Spirit is present and active in our lives. But sometimes, there is a visible, tangible presence, and I believe God can use such things as a sign, to bring hope and encouragement to us. We have some dear friends, Val and Norman Yeats, who live in Pietermaritzburg. This week I asked them if they would mind my telling a story they told us quite a while ago, and they said of course it would be OK. Their eldest son, Charles, who later became a priest and now lives in England, in the early 1980's, was the first Christian conscientious objector who refused to do his military service under the apartheid Government, and also refused to wear a military uniform (which meant his sentence was extended from one year to two). It was of course a very difficult time for his family. They told us of an amazing experience they had during the time of Charles' trial, at which Charles, who was only 24, chose to conduct his own defence on the grounds of his Christian convictions. The trial lasted for three days. Charles' parents were present throughout, and also about 30 others, mostly Christian friends, and including Archbishop Philip Russell, of the Anglican Church, and Archbishop Denis Hurley, of the Roman Catholic Church. On the third morning of the trial, Charles was struggling to overcome his tiredness, and to gather his wits in response to a barrage of questions from the Prosecutor. Suddenly, a white dove flew into the courtroom through an open window. It circled three times above Charles' head, and then flew up and perched on the ledge above the window, where it stayed, sitting there quietly, for the rest of the day. It was seen by everybody who was there... there was no imagining it. From the moment they saw the dove, the family began to experience a deep sense of peace, and inner calm. The bird was a sure sign to them of the presence of God, and the power of the Holy Spirit. They knew the outcome of the trial would be jail for Charles, but they also knew that he and they could trust in God for strength in coping with the outcome. It was a gift to them, a grace, and a promise of God's love and faithfulness even in a situation of injustice.

So, we have looked today at Jesus' own baptism, the empowering of Jesus by the Holy Spirit, and the revealing of the Trinity. For us, baptized into the family of Christian believers, whether we were baptized as small children, or as adults, the

promise is the same. To be baptized is to belong to ourselves no longer. It is to belong to Christ, because, in a sense, from the time of our baptism, the death of Jesus is now part of our life. Jesus gives us new life because of the power of the Resurrection. Baptism is a movement from darkness to light, from despair to hope, and from sin to grace. There is, in each one of us, a child-like centre... a child's heart, if you like... the child who would like to be forgiven, the child who would like to be loved.... The child who needs to be accepted. God lives within each of us, by virtue of our baptism... so we know that we are forgiven; we are loved, always, and we are accepted as God's own children. But baptism is also a call to service. We are continually invited to renew the grace of baptism in our lives. The seed was planted, but it needs to be encouraged to grow within us, so that we may bear the fruit of Christian living in the community where we live. As the family of believers in this place, we ask God today to remind us of the promises made at our own baptisms, and of the unity which we share, together with God through that, because we all belong to the body of Christ.

So, may we remember that we are each named, loved, treasured, and chosen by God. May we live our daily lives as those who believe in the power of the Holy Spirit to energize us and equip us, and to make us all that God calls us to be. In Jesus' Name we ask it. **Amen.**