

A Sermon by Canon Maggie Guite

Epiphany 1A

January 10th, 2021

Genesis 1.1-5

Mark 1.4-11

'My Son, the Beloved'

Five weeks ago, on 6th December, if you were at the Eucharist in church, or following our virtual service at home, you will have heard (or read) part of the same Gospel passage we heard today. Why is our lectionary— our course of readings – repeating itself so quickly?

The story is about John the Baptist, an uncouth yet arresting man, who *'appeared in the wilderness preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. And people from the whole Judean countryside, and all the people of Jerusalem, were going out to him, and were baptized by him in the River Jordan, confessing their sins.'* (Mark 1.4.5) But he preached not himself, but one who was coming, who would, John said, *'baptize...with the Holy Spirit'* (v.8). This one, said John, would be so great that he – John – would not be worthy even to take a disciple's accustomed role of bending down to untie the thong of the Master's sandal (v.7)

The reading five weeks ago ended at that point. It had looked back into the past, to the prophets, and told us who John was - that he was a divinely intended messenger; *'the voice of one crying in the wilderness'*, as had been foretold in the book of Isaiah. Now, today's version of the same story moves forward to reveal the identity of the greater one who was coming— Jesus, from Nazareth in Galilee – not at all who might have been expected. An artisan, from a small place up north, someone blending into the crowds as they all surged forward to be baptised.

If the author of the Gospel had looked to the past to tell us who John was, he now asks us to look to the future – into events as they unfold – to see who Jesus is.

And what begins to unfold is immediate – a vision; heaven torn open, God's Holy Spirit made visible in the form of a dove, and a voice from heaven declaring *'You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.'* (v.11).

Mark's Gospel, like Matthew's, implies that this vision was given to Jesus alone; in Luke and John's Gospel we are led to believe that John the Baptist witnessed it, too. Later on, in Jesus' ministry there was a similar event – a similar revelation – on the mountain where Jesus was transfigured before his disciples' eyes, and that time both the vision and the voice from heaven were clearly experienced by the disciples as well, we assume, by Jesus. The words then were *'This is my Son, the Beloved. Listen to him!'* (Mark 9.7) The common factor, on both occasions, is the phrase, *'My Son, the Beloved'*. Let's dwell on those words in three ways.

Firstly, let's think of them as a profound revelation of Jesus' being – a true Epiphany of his nature. Never before had anyone trodden the earth who was God's Son in the sense that he was (and is). Israel's kings had been addressed as those whom God had made his sons – you can see it in some of the psalms. In a similar way, we rejoice to be children of God by adoption and grace. But Jesus is revealed at his Baptism as God's Son in a unique sense – one with the Father, completely divine in nature, yet also fully human. It's a mind-blowing thought – like the doctrine that there is one God in three persons; we can't with human logic get our heads round it. And yet we're asked to embrace it with our hearts in faith. God's Son on earth and living our life: Emmanuel, God with us.

Now, just at this point, I'm going to make a little diversion, but I hope it will open up to you a bit more the nature of the revelation, the Epiphany, at Jesus' baptism:

You may have noticed that the first reading today was the beginning of the story of creation from the book of Genesis. Perhaps you wondered why. But stop for a moment and think of the symbols used in parallel in the creation story and in the account of Jesus' baptism: First, water; second a wind from God (or God's Spirit – you all know, I'm sure, that the words for wind and Spirit, and also for breath, are the same in both the Hebrew and Greek of the Bible.) And then, in the creation story we're told explicitly that light broke into the darkness, and God recognised that it was good. In the baptism story, we're not told explicitly that light broke into darkness, but the idea of the heavens torn apart strongly implies a great shaft of light, as is so often portrayed in icons and paintings of this event. And thirdly, we hear God declare that Jesus – the one we have come to know as the light of the world – is the object of his pleasure *'My Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.'*

Why have these two passages been put together on this day? The parallelism in the stories isn't there just by chance. It's saying that with Jesus there comes a new creation; God has broken-in to do something utterly new. Ironically, the Old Testament reading about the 'oldest event in the world' (the creation) is there to highlight for us that in Jesus the most futuristic thing has come among us – the future of God's kingdom, for which we long, and for which we are destined. Another mind-blowing thought.

But let's get back to those words from heaven, *'My Son, the Beloved'*, and think of them in a second way. Whether or not anybody other than Jesus heard them when he came up out of the water after his Baptism, we can be sure that for him, as a human being, they must have had great psychological effect.

Can you remember either of your parents ever telling you in a more than casual way that they loved you, and were proud of you? I do hope you can. Too many of us go through life uncertain of ourselves, of our value or our worth. Have you heard that phrase 'Impostor Syndrome'? It describes the feeling so many people harbour that one day they will be found out as 'not good enough' – not good enough for the job they've got, the love they're offered, the respect people show them. It's a real and disabling temptation. Jesus – a true human being, remember – could have been tempted by that nagging feeling as he entered into his ministry of authority, wonder and teaching; but at key moments like his Baptism

(just before he was tested severely in the wilderness) , and at the Transfiguration,(when he was setting his face to go to Jerusalem to do his greatest work of all) he was given this ultimate assurance: *'You are my Son, the Beloved. With you I am well pleased.'* The assurance of the Father's love and approval gave him, we must imagine, the inner strengthening his human nature needed to walk firmly on the path set before him.

So, thirdly, when we ponder those words, *'My Son, the beloved...'* we may reflect how much we need to hear them, too. We are not the unique Son of God, of course, nor are we without sins and flaws. Speaking for myself, I could mention plenty! And it's those very sins and flaws which may make it difficult for each of us privately to believe that God really does love us – not to mention whatever natural lack of self-confidence we have grown up with. But none of this expunges the truth that each of us is a child of God by adoption and grace - a beloved child, signified in our baptism. Although we may not be able to remember that event (though some lucky people can!) we can hang on to it and be sure that in the waters of baptism God did say to us, irreversibly, *'You are my child, my beloved. With you I am well pleased.'* Even our greatest sin and shame – our embarrassment with ourselves - cannot wipe out this identity he gave us then. So, if we are ever tested and at our lowest ebb, we can join with the Protestant reformer Luther in answering the devil as he tries to tell us that we're just not good enough for God to love, by saying the simple but triumphant words *'I am baptised!'* In baptism we were united with Christ, who was baptised for us, and in our union with Christ the Father smiles on us, loves us, and strengthens us, just as he smiled on him.