

**A SERMON PREACHED BY THE DEAN ON SUNDAY 8TH JANUARY 2012
- AT THE CATHEDRAL EUCHARIST –
THE BAPTISM OF CHRIST**

In the Gospels, especially Mark, the Baptism of Jesus marks the beginning of his public ministry. I say 'especially Mark', because in this, the first of the four Gospels, we find no mention of the birth at Bethlehem or what we know as the Christmas Story. Rather, we are pitched into the ministry of the adult Jesus by way of that curious and austere figure, John the Baptist, or Baptizer.

Mark stresses John's humility: He is not worthy even 'to untie the thong of the sandals' of the One who was coming. John's task was to prepare the way. All that, we know if we have been attentive to the Advent Scriptures, and to the great Christmas Gospel from the beginning of St John.

Jesus received Baptism, and Mark tells us that, in a mysterious but perceptible way, at the same time he received the Spirit, and his unique commission as the Son of the most high God, who had come to proclaim God's Kingdom. This act of new creation was prefigured by the Spirit sweeping over the face of the waters in the first chapter of Genesis.

John the Baptist pointed people to Jesus, the one in whom God the Father was 'well pleased'. As Mark made clear in the very first verse of Chapter One, here we have the beginning of the Gospel, the good news of Jesus Christ. But it leaves us with a huge question mark, or it does me, at any rate: To which Jesus was John pointing? Because there is the Jesus who was and there is the Jesus who is.

The Jesus who was is that elusive figure who moves through the pages of the first three Gospels – attractive, for sure, but at the same time mysterious, unpredictable, tantalising – one moment knowable, and the next impossible to fathom.

The Jesus who was is even more complex when he appears as the dreamlike, mystical figure in the pages of the Fourth Gospel. We glimpse this figure in instantly memorable vignettes: As the stranger at a well asking for water; the one who falls asleep in the stern of a boat; who plucks an ear of corn on a Sabbath morning; who heals a blind man, a leper, a lunatic in a graveyard... and we listen to his strange stories, so far removed from our

everyday experience, but no doubt rooted in the everyday lives of country-folk and fishermen.

Every one of us has Gospel moments that we treasure. For me, first comes Jesus' answer to Philip's request to show him the Father: 'The one who has seen me has seen the Father'; but there are so many others: 'Jesus, remember me when you come into your Kingdom'... 'Today you will be with me in Paradise'; and on the lake-shore after the resurrection, 'Come and have breakfast'. All will have their favourite episode....

But then, of course, we are inclined to gloss over some of the others: the cursing of the fig tree, the time Jesus told the Canaanite woman who had come to him for help that it wasn't fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs, or the terrible judgement: 'I was thirsty and you gave me no drink, naked and you did not clothe me'. 'Woe to you when all speak well of you, for that is how their fathers treated the false prophets'.

But the Jesus who was, for all the hard sayings, and they are legion, offered the timeless invitation: 'Come unto me all that labour and are heavy laden and I will give you rest'. And that points us to the other Jesus, the Jesus who is.

The Jesus who is, is the one who promised to be with his people until the end of time. The last words in the Bible are 'Come, Lord Jesus' – and it is as the one who comes that we know Him the most. I often go back to another purple passage, not from Scripture this time but from that strange scholar, doctor, missionary and musician, Albert Schweitzer, in words that I know I have quoted in this pulpit before, because they are very real to me:

'He comes to us as One unknown, without a name, as of old, by the lakeside, He came to those who knew Him not. He speaks to us the same word: 'Follow thou me'! and sets us to the task which He has to fulfil for our time. He commands, and to those who obeys Him, whether they be wise or simple, He will reveal Himself in the toil, the conflicts, the sufferings which they shall pass through in His fellowship, and, as an ineffable mystery, they shall learn in their own experience Who He is'.

The Jesus who was – the Jesus who is: He has revealed himself in so many guises and under so many titles – the bread, the shepherd, the vine, the light, the way, the truth, the life: Which is it? All of these or one of them? Is

He my personal Saviour or the Lord of Heaven and earth? Well, He is both, and more besides.

The Jesus who was undermined human values and institutions that excluded anyone; He spent time with those on the margins; the unclean were honoured and made clean; He told beggars and prostitutes that they would be the first in the Kingdom; the last would be first and the first last. In Jesus, people discerned God – a gracious God whose table includes all, but especially those who find themselves excluded from human tables.

The Jesus who is – alive and in our midst – has given us so many clues to his nature, and therefore to the nature of God Himself. We cannot love as Jesus did, because – and then only if we are very fortunate – we can love only a few, while He loves all people, intensely and continuously. Our love is more usually pretty feeble, and on and off according to mood and circumstance.

And yet, and yet... Every Sunday in this Cathedral – every day of the year, indeed – we are reminded in the Eucharist, the one act of worship He commanded us to continue, of the breadth and the depth of the love of God, revealed in Jesus Christ.

Our Bishop rightly reminded us on Christmas morning that, for Christians, the New Year properly began on Advent Sunday; but at the beginning of this new calendar year, may we be open to the power and influence of God's Spirit; may we unlock our minds and our hearts to the Jesus who was, who is and who is to come. May we be a source of strength and joy to all whom we serve, in the name of the One who the Queen was not ashamed to describe as 'Our Lord'.