

CHICHESTER CATHEDRAL

Date:	11 January 2026
Service:	Eucharist, Baptism of Christ
Preacher:	The Revd Canon Vanessa Baron, Treasurer

As some of you may know, I did not grow up within the Church of England. From the age of about 5, I went along to church with friends from school and it was a Baptist Church not the local parish church. One of the advantages of this is that I can remember being baptised and, of course, it was baptism by total immersion. I can recall walking down into the baptismal pool, being submerged three times, and then walking out the other side of the pool. A clear visual image of the way on which baptism unites us, not only with Christ in his baptism, but with his death and resurrection. And baptism by total immersion was the common practice of the Church well into the Middle Ages. Next month we will replace the 950 Exhibition with one about John Piper and it will contain two striking photographs of Norman fonts. They are massive deep fonts, clearly designed so that the baby could be submerged in the baptismal water!

Today, in the season of the Epiphany, we celebrate the Baptism of Christ. Why now? some of you may be asking. Surely it belongs in Lent, because the Spirit immediately drives Jesus out into the wilderness. Why immediately after the visit of the Wise Men? The answer lies in the text of Mt 3.

John the Baptist has been calling people to repent in preparation for the coming of Messiah, to confess their sins, change their ways and be baptised by him in the Jordan. A powerful preacher, he was very clear that he himself was not the Messiah – rather he looked forward to one ‘more powerful’ than himself; one who would baptise with the ‘Holy Spirit and with fire’, who would sort out the wheat from the chaff. I think we can understand some of John’s bewilderment when one day he sees Jesus approaching; the Jesus who asks to be baptised. ‘That’s the wrong way round!’ is basically what John says to Jesus. ‘I need your baptism of fire and the Spirit, not you my baptism with water!’ Like John, we understand, that Jesus does not need to undergo any baptism of repentance, so why does Jesus ask to be baptised?

Jesus' reply to John might seem puzzling; Jesus responds that he wants to be baptised 'to fulfil all righteousness' – what does he mean by this? People like me, schooled in Luther's Theology of the Cross, tend to see the word 'righteousness' and leap to the legal understanding that is used by St Paul. But Matthew uses it differently, to mean an obedient relationship with God. Jesus regards his baptism as an essential step in fulfilling His Father's purpose of salvation.

There is an extraordinary link here with the Incarnation that we celebrated only two weeks ago. In the same way that Christ was willing to empty himself of all his glory and become human, to be born as a human baby (Philippians 2:7) — so here on the banks of the Jordan, Jesus puts aside any sense of superiority, of dignity and was willing to identify himself with God's penitent people; to join with them in an obedient response to John the Baptists' message and humbly submit to being baptised by him. This, to use Matthew's title for Jesus, is Emmanuel, God with us.

In the 4C, a Syrian theologian, St Ephrem, wrote a series of 15 Hymns for the Epiphany and many of them focus on Jesus' Baptism. In one of them St Ephrem imagines the conversation between a reluctant John the Baptist and Jesus. He focuses on the paradoxes presented by Jesus' request to be baptised. John argues - 'The river is so small and even the heavens cannot contain your might.' To which Jesus replies, 'The womb is smaller than the Jordan and I was willing to lodge there.' At the Baptism, the feet that walked on the water of Lake Galilee, are submerged beneath the water of the Jordan. It's akin to the paradoxes Christina Rossetti explores in her beloved carol, 'In the bleak midwinter' - In the bleak mid-winter, A stable-place sufficed, The Lord God Almighty - Jesus Christ.'

John the Baptist was right, the Kingdom of Heaven had come near, but not in the way he expected. Instead, the all-mighty creator, the all-powerful one makes a request; the one who had no need of repentance is baptised with those who do need to repent. It's as if an orchestra has been playing and is building up to a climax, when suddenly, unexpectedly it changes key. And that key change has come to stay.

This act of self-effacement – of identification with the sinful, penitent people coming to John results in the heavens opening, the Spirit descending like a dove, settling on Jesus and the voice from Heaven confirming Jesus' identity, "This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased." There are lots of deliberate echoes here – we are meant to think of the Spirit of God brooding over the face of the waters in Creation, as the Baptism of Christ marks the

beginning of a new creation, a new Kingdom – into which men and women will be incorporated by their own baptism. The Spirit, the wind, the breath of God settling on Jesus in the form of a dove, alludes to the peace this Messiah will bring.

At the same time the voice from Heaven confirms Jesus as God's anointed Son, with words taken from Psalm 2 and the servant song of Isaiah 42 'Here is my servant, whom I uphold: my chosen in whom my soul delights: I have put my spirit on him; he will bring justice to the nations. He will not cry out or lift up his voice or make it heard in the street, a bruised reed he will not break.'

Inevitably, and rightly, Isaiah's servant songs make us think of the events of Easter, where Jesus' choosing to be counted among us, leads him to be immersed in our human death on the Cross; his descent into Hell and final resurrection.

Last week the Canon Chancellor defined an Epiphany as a sudden realisation; an awakening – a sort of, 'I've got it!' moment. There are several epiphanies in this passage. First, at the Baptism, God is revealed as Trinity: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. But also, there is the realisation that God has come among us gently, humbly, quietly – to lead us back to himself. And to all the baptised, who have been incorporated into Christ's death and resurrection, there is the staggering assurance that God says to us, 'You are loved. You are forgiven. You are mine'.

We celebrate the baptism of Christ today because of these epiphanies – but, like John the Baptist, we have to come to terms with the fact that God has chosen to come among us in a very unexpected manner – as a baby, God with us, alongside us. Jesus choosing to identify with us – the unlovely, that we 'might lovely be'.

It may be that we need a personal epiphany, to recognise the way in which God is calling us to follow his beloved Son's example – it ought to 'shock us to be told that the universe lives by the kind of love that we see in a helpless child and in a dying man on the cross'. In a world so anxious about power, the baptism of Christ shows a different way – of Christ coming to be with us and giving away 'all that he is in love'. Amen.