

Two and a half weeks after celebrating the story of Christ's birth – we now fast forward in the church calendar time-line some 30 years to the beginning of Jesus's ministry in Galilee.

The story of his baptism is covered by Matthew, Mark and Luke. All 3 use this event to proclaim in no uncertain terms that Jesus IS the Messiah, the one for whom God's people have been waiting. All describe John the Baptist as a wild man who has been baptizing those who were willing to repent of their sins.

They also make a point of saying that John is NOT the Messiah, perhaps because rumours were beginning to go around at the time that he was.

Jesus appears among the crowds waiting to be baptized by John. His immersion is followed by words from heaven - a proclamation that Jesus is God's beloved child. This is the point at which Jesus's identity is revealed to all and marks the start of his public ministry.

Jesus' baptism makes ours possible – the water that Jesus was immersed in did not sanctify him - as he was already totally without sin – instead he sanctified the water for us – to give us life in him. Our baptism is about the very beginning of our life of faith.

One thing particularly struck me as I prepared this talk for today – did you notice in our reading that John says "I baptise with water" but the one who comes after "will baptise with the Holy Spirit and FIRE". I hadn't really taken this in before. Fire!

At our baptism we receive the Holy Spirit which is not just a rushing wind but a fire!! Our very own personal pilot light – our faith light - let's not ignore it, quench it or put it out!

There are many references to God's refining fire in the bible – used as a metaphor for how God purifies and transforms us. Fire is often used in the process of purifying precious metals such as gold and silver – its an honour that God considers us as precious as these metals and worthy to be purified in this way. Later in this service we are going to sing Purify my heart – which has the lyrics "refiners fire, my hearts one desire, is to be holy, set apart for you Lord" – really ponder on these words and let them resonate within you.

In our Isaiah reading, written around 700 years before Christ's birth we are given an affirmation that God loves everyone, he knows us, sees us and is with us. Words that tell us that we are loved – our first identity is "loved by God".

"Do not fear, for I have redeemed you, I have summoned you by name; you are mine"

"you are precious and honoured in my sight"

"do not be afraid, for I am with you"

At our baptism – the vicar places a cross on our forehead and says "Christ claims you for his own. Receive the sign of his cross." We are called by name, we belong to

God. Our baptism connects us to one another and incorporates us all into the Body of Christ - the church.

Many of us were probably too young to actually remember this happening at our own baptisms. But today gives us the opportunity to remember our identity as God's children. Hearing those promises from Isaiah as words for us today and celebrating that we are all a part of God's covenant, connected through Jesus Christ.

Some here may not have been baptised. It's not too late. Why not come along to the course Revd Jon is running during Lent exploring our faith and see if this is a step you might like to take.

The act of baptism – an act that Jesus himself underwent – is one that reminds us that each and everyone of us (no exceptions) is beloved by God, a child of God, liked by God, loved by God – even when we find it difficult to like or love ourselves or those around us. In tough times as well as easy times, happiness and sadness he loves us just the same.

God's love is for each of us – not because of anything good we've done, but simply because we are ourselves. There is absolutely nothing that we can do to earn a bigger share of God's love.

And names are hugely important – they are powerful things. They create identity, they create relationship. When we call someone by their name we affirm them and acknowledge their identity.

God says at Jesus's baptism – "you are my beloved Son". At our baptism our names are confirmed.

Now here's a challenge for 2025 – do you know the names of everyone sitting here in church with you today? I'm sure you know their faces and smile and say hello to them every week - but do you KNOW their names? Let's start using one another's names during the peace – Eileen, peace be with you. Chris, peace be with you. And if you don't know their name - ask it - so that next week you can use it!?

Baptism doesn't eliminate our difficulties, fix our problems, take away our pain or change the circumstances of our lives. Instead it changes us and offers us a way through these difficulties, sorrows and problems as God says in Isaiah: "Do not fear, for I have redeemed you, I have called you by name, you are mine".

Amen

Carol Elsasser, 12 Jan 2025