

**Beloved children: Bishop Michael's sermon
for 10 January 2021
Epiphany 1 [Baptism of the Lord]:**

The Gospel of Mark tells of the Baptism of Jesus two thousand years ago. I want to tell you about the baptism of my granddaughter Rosaline two and a bit years ago. Our daughter-in-law is Russian, and Rosaline was baptised in a little church in Russia near the Estonian border. It was a joyful celebration, with little Rosalinka sat in a huge tub as gallons of water were poured over her, she was drenched in oil, and a great feast was had by all. It was so different from the baptism of her grandfather –not me, but her Russian grandfather, 50 something years ago. That was in Soviet days, and Evgeni's grandmother knew that her daughter (his mother) would not approve, as a member of the Communist party. So she arranged for the priest to call in secret while her daughter was out at work, and he hurriedly baptised little Evgeny in the kitchen sink. Fast forward to two years ago, and Evgeny's mother's way of thinking had changed so much that it was actually she who arranged her own granddaughter's baptism.

That family understood what a precious gift baptism is in our lives. We sometimes take it for granted, but Mark puts the story of Jesus' baptism right at the start of his gospel, to underline its importance not just for the Lord but for us his followers. So what is it all about?

First of all, it is about a new creation, a starting all over again. There is something fresh here breaking into the world, breaking into our lives. Our readings this morning underline that by taking us back to the beginning of the whole Bible, to the opening verses of Genesis. There, in the dawn of time, was the deep water, sign and means of baptism. And over the face of the deep there hovered what some translations call 'a wind from God'. But the Hebrew word also means 'the Spirit of God' –there, right at the start, were water and the Spirit, just as the Holy Spirit hovered over Jesus like a dove as he came out from the waters of the Jordan. The story of creation happens all over again in the life of the Christ; and it happens all over again in the life of us Christians.

And then, that new creation is a gift. Like being born, this is not something we can arrange for ourselves, but only receive in gratitude. There is a power, a strength, a wisdom, a love from beyond that is poured upon us. This is the greatest of gifts given to us in creation, the uncreated gift of the Spirit who is God. In the reading from Acts 19 appointed for this morning, St Paul makes this very clear to some people in Ephesus who so far have only known the baptism of John. 'Did you receive the Holy Spirit?', he asks them. 'No, we have not even heard that there is a Holy Spirit', they reply. So Paul baptises them in the name of Jesus, and the Holy Spirit comes upon them. Our Christian life is not something we take for ourselves; it is given to us in the Spirit.

As the Spirit comes down upon Jesus, there is a voice heard from heaven. Now, this is the great climax of the story. Think of it: there is a great crowd gathered there, the heavens are torn apart, extraordinary things are going on. Now is the time to get the message across –now, in this moment of drama, when everybody's attention is riveted. Just imagine –what message would you want to get across at that point if you were God? Suppose you had one minute on prime-time TV to address a nation. What would you want to say most of all? Suppose you had hired a plane to pull a banner streaming across central London. What would you write on that banner? Now is the time; what is the message?

God's message is so simple, it is almost an anticlimax. He doesn't tell people how to live; he doesn't unveil a secret wisdom; he doesn't threaten; he doesn't promise; he doesn't explain the future. He just says to Jesus: 'You're my boy; and you're all right' –that's what he means when he says: 'You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased'. This is the one important thing he needs to get across: to tell Jesus how much he loves him. In other words, this baptism is about identity: who Jesus is, and who is the one he belongs to. And what God said to Jesus he said to each one of us in the baptism that made us Christians: 'You're my boy, my girl; and you're all right'. What Jesus is by nature, we become by adoption and grace: beloved sons and daughters of a God who loves us and make us his own.

That is the most important message God wants us to hear, and that is why we need to take our baptism seriously: because it assures us of our identity. We live in an age where many people are really unsure about who they are, confused about their identity, bewildered by the celebrity 'icons' paraded before them. People fight furiously about identity, how A's identity threatens B's, or C's is better than D's; and the more unsure of themselves they feel the shriller they shout.

But, for us who are baptised in the name of Jesus Christ, identity is given and secure. When my little Rosalinka was lifted out of the tub, the priest lifted her up high above his head and whooshed her along in front of the screen full of icons –real icons, of saints not celebrities. Her little face lit up with delight at their glittering golden surfaces, but the inner joy was to know that these shining ones were now her brothers and sisters: like you, like me, she has become a citizen of heaven.

The great Reformer Martin Luther was troubled by doubts, fears, anxieties throughout his life. Terrors would suddenly grab him in the middle of the night, or when he was sitting with friends. But he always had one way of overcoming his fears. Lying in bed, to his wife's annoyance he would shout out: 'Baptizatus sum, I have been baptised'. Visiting his

friends, to their annoyance he would write on walls or tables with a piece of chalk: *Baptizatus sum*. That identity gave him peace of mind.

Whether in the joy of celebration, or the anxiety of mental distress, or just the everyday business of living, this is what our baptism means for us. It marks us out as a new creation of God. It tells us that both the start of our Christian life and its continuance are a gift from God the Holy Spirit. Most of all, it assures us that we are who we are: beloved daughters and sons of God.

That identity is something which we are to carry with us throughout our lives, and which nobody can take from us. The theologian Elizabeth Stuart wrote these moving words after being at the funeral of a friend:

There is only one identity stable enough to hope in ... In the end before the throne of grace everything will dissolve except that identity ... Gender, race, sexual orientation, family, nationality and all other culturally constructed identities will not survive the grave ... [But] the I that I am is God's own special creation, and that is my only ground for hope.

So, as you stand at the beginning of this new year of 2021, give thanks to God for the baptism with which he has made you his own. Give thanks for the baptism in which he said to you: 'You're my boy, my girl; and you're all right'. Give thanks for the baptism which gives you an identity in which you can live your life with assurance of love and hope of glory.

+Michael Lichfield