

1st Sunday of Epiphany and Baptism of Christ 10 January 2021

As you all know church services are once again suspended locally as we are in another lockdown. Both Veronica and I have had to return to full shielding and Jenny is still working full time with her key role as chaplain to Bucks university. We are having a ministry team meeting next week and will be discussing how we continue to be 'church' locally over the coming months of lockdown. I know that some of you attend one of the many Zoom offerings from nearby churches or from the Diocese, and of course we have been offering you a weekly reflection like this one on the Sunday readings throughout. If you have strong opinions on what you would like the local churches here to offer, please do let one of us know (no guarantees that all wishes can be fulfilled of course but we will continue to do our best!)

With each subsequent COVID related blow it becomes more essential than ever to remember that Christmas promise of hope and light coming into the world, a promise that is echoed in so many acts of selflessness and compassion by so many for their neighbours.

Collect

Heavenly Father

At the Jordan you revealed Jesus as your Son:

may we recognise him as our Lord and know ourselves to be your beloved children;

Through Jesus Christ our Saviour

Amen

Readings

Genesis 1: 1-5

In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth, the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep, while a wind from God swept over the face of the waters. Then God said, 'Let there be light'; and there was light. And God saw that the light was good; and God separated the light from the darkness. God called the light Day, and the darkness he called Night. And there was evening and there was morning, the first day.

Acts 19: 1-7

While Apollos was in Corinth, Paul passed through the inland regions and came to Ephesus, where he found some disciples. He said to them, 'Did you receive the Holy Spirit when you became believers?' They replied, 'No, we have not even heard that there is a Holy Spirit.' Then he said, 'Into what then were you baptized?' They answered, 'Into John's baptism.' Paul said, 'John baptized with the baptism of repentance, telling the people to believe in the one who was to come after him, that is, in Jesus.' On hearing this, they were baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus. When Paul had laid his hands on them, the Holy Spirit came upon them, and they spoke in tongues and prophesied—altogether there were about twelve of them.

Mark 1: 4-11

John the baptizer appeared in the wilderness, proclaiming 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. Now John was clothed with camel's hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey. He proclaimed, 'The one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to stoop down and untie the thong of his sandals. I have baptized you with water; but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.'

In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. And just as he was coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on him. And a voice came from heaven, 'You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.'

Reflection

- Many of us, as we get to grips with a New Year, are perhaps looking back on the world we left behind us last year
- We live in two worlds – what is behind us and what is ahead
- At the moment we remember the world we lived in before COVID restrictions and we look ahead to a world when those freedoms can return
- We were hoping that our 'real' lives would return soon
- That hope is on hold for at least a little while longer but today's reading from Mark's gospel did make me think of beginnings and endings – the ending of John's ministry and the beginning of Christ's
- Staying with the theme of two worlds for a while I wonder how many of you have read (or seen the film) of Tolkien's Lord of the Rings?
- There is one part where Frodo escapes the pursuit of the ghost black riders by crossing a river into Rivendell, the home of the elves. As he collapses he sees a shining figure on a white horse riding on the waves of the flooded river. He recognises the figure as Glorfindel, someone Frodo knows as an elf man
- When he asks for an explanation afterwards he is told that he has seen Glorfindel as he is on the 'other side', an elf lord of great power
- In Tolkien's world the elves live in two worlds – one among humans and one in their own eternal home across the flooded waters. Just occasionally the two worlds meet, and the elves' true power can be seen
- Jesus too lives in 2 worlds – one as human here on earth with us, and one as the eternal Son of God in heaven
- There are only a few moments in the whole of the gospels when we see Jesus as he is 'on the other side' – when we can catch a glimpse of those two worlds meeting
- And today's reading of Christ's baptism by John is the first of these
- As he is baptised Jesus sees the sky open up and the Spirit flies down to him like a dove. He hears the words 'you are my Son, the Beloved in whom I am well pleased'
- Incidentally those same words are used in the next biblical event showing Jesus' 2 worlds meeting – the Transfiguration (if I was with you in person you know that would have been a question to you all so well done if you knew that!)
- Both of these are moments when heaven and earth meet, and Jesus is revealed for a moment as he is on the other side. They come at key moments – as he starts his ministry here in today's gospel reading, and as he begins preparing for his death
- And the final glimpse of these two worlds meeting is of course at Jesus' death when the centurion, present at the moment of death, says 'truly this man was God's Son'
- Today's reading shows us that Jesus belongs in both worlds
- We too live in both worlds – our baptism, our belief, gives us a home in heaven to add to our home in earth, we are members of God's family and welcome at his table
- And even now, amidst all the troubles of the world we may catch the occasional glimpse of that other world
 - in a neighbour reaching out to another who is alone or struggling
 - In friendships and relationships that thrive despite social distance
 - In the faces of health professionals and carers, of families
 - In support bubbles
 - In the beauty of God's creation that surrounds us

- Heaven may be closer than we think!
- Let me finish with these words from Isaiah which are true even where God in our world is not always absolutely and clearly visible to us
 - Do not be afraid for I am with you always (Isaiah 41:10)