

The Baptism of Christ, 2022, Year C. Luke 3.15-17, 21-22

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The people were filled with expectation.

The people were questioning in their hearts...

The people were baptized.

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our strength and our redeemer. **Amen.**

Once again we hear of John the Baptist during this extended season of Christmas that ends with Mary and Joseph presenting Jesus in the Temple. There Simeon exclaims, "Lord, now lettest thou thy servant depart in peace, for mine eyes have seen thy salvation." And there Anna the prophet speaks "about the child to all (in the Temple) who were looking for the redemption of Jerusalem." The focus today is yes on Jesus' baptism, on his willingness to submit himself to John's ministry whereby he aligns himself with it, but the extraordinary thing occurs after Jesus has been baptised while praying. The heavens are opened. And a voice says, 'You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.'

The heavens being opened reminds us of St Stephen's martyrdom, which we marked the day after Christmas Day. Stephen sees the heavens opened and exclaiming, witnessing says 'Look, I see the heavens opened and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God!' Luke the author of the Book of the Acts of the Apostles and the Gospel named after him is building an arch that begins with Jesus' baptism at the hands of John and takes us to St Stephen's encounter with the elders in Jerusalem, the Sanhedrin. Stephen's witness will cost him his life. He will be remembered as the first martyr of the fledgling church. Churches will be named after him. A stained glass window witnessing to him may remind those who gather for worship of his stoning. Jesus is willing to lay down his life, as we will learn anew as we move towards Good Friday and Easter. Stephen in turn is willing to lay down his life, as he witnesses to what God has done in Jesus Christ.

At the beginning of a new calendar year 2022 that intersects with our keeping of the Christian year and moreover with Christ's baptism marking the beginning of his public ministry we as "the people" are offered an opportunity today to begin afresh to enter into the minds and movement of the people that

Luke writes about in today's gospel. They are mentioned twice. The first time we are told that the people were full of expectation and that they were questioning in their hearts about John. Is he the Messiah? The second time we are told that after all the people and Jesus had been baptised as well – only then were the heavens opened and then specifically during prayer. Luke the evangelist witnesses throughout his writings to the power of prayer, its effectiveness.

A little later in the service we will be offered an opportunity to affirm our faith. This can be for all of us a significant moment in our walk with God, as we seek to follow and serve Christ in the world today. It is customary to make new year's resolutions. Listening to others it seems that many through experience have given up on new year resolutions as we are void of expectancy to even meet a few of them, but I can imagine that even the most cynical amongst us will have had, in the one or the other fleeting moment, an inkling of what our new year's resolutions might have looked like had we more will, discipline, wisdom and a sense of urgency. Mine would be to do with diet. What I eat. How much I eat. What I drink. How much I drink.

I know that what I just said about the void of expectancy contrasts with the people of today's gospel. The ones who went out to John full of expectancy wondering if John might be the Messiah, the promised one foretold by prophets, God's messengers. Before I get carried away with trying to awaken in all of us a spirit of expectancy by whipping up excitement and emotions, one needs to also warn believers against false expectancy. I am thinking of those who down the centuries have predicted the end of the world in their own life time. Too many to be named here.

Once again I am reminded of a retreat I attended as a young adult Christian. The theme of the retreat was, "How do we keep the cutting edge of faith sharp throughout the seasons of life?" The question raised is one that has visited me from time to time during the subsequent years. This will sound stupid, but I can't recall any of the advice given, the techniques presented...Did the retreat leader speak about the need for Christian friends, I wonder? Or of companions in the faith? What matters for me, and it has always followed naturally, is to stay close to the Church (capital C) as a worshipping and praying community. The public liturgy of the church has kept me close and will I am confident keep me close in the years allotted. Close to what or to whom? To God. To Christ. While seeking the gifts of the Holy Spirit.

In a little while, as many as feel able will be invited to affirm their baptismal vows before God and before one another. We will set Christ at the centre of our lives. He is the one we turn to as Saviour, the one we come to as the way,

the truth and the life and the one we submit to as Lord. This commitment is tightly woven and we do so having rejected our rebellion against God, having renounced the deceit and corruption of evil and having repented of our sins against God and neighbour. Having recited the Apostles' Creed we will make the Affirmation of Commitment. I like to draw people's attention to this Commitment, because it succinctly provides each Christian with what one might call a job description. The language of vocation, of being called, can obscure for some that to be a Christian involves work and it is this work that will come to shape us to a large extent and will help us to grow into the likeness of Christ, as we pray every year on the Sunday next before Lent: "Almighty God, ... give us grace to perceive Christ's glory, that we may be strengthened to suffer with him and be changed into his likeness, from glory to glory..."

Here follow the five questions that we will be asked during the Affirmation of Commitment minus the recurring response "With the help of God, I will".

Will you continue in the apostles' teaching and fellowship,
in the breaking of the bread, and in the prayers?

Will you persevere in resisting evil and,
whenever you fall into sin, repent and return to the Lord?

Will you proclaim by word and example
the good news of God in Christ?

Will you seek and serve Christ in all people,
loving your neighbour as yourself?

Will you acknowledge Christ's authority over human society,
by prayer for the world and its leaders,
by defending the weak, and by seeking peace and justice?

I shan't elaborate on the above, but I wanted to give everyone a chance to hear the questions for themselves the job description and the commitment to be affirmed. There are however two things I feel I need to say here and they stand in some tension to one another. The first, and I will keep it short, is that I still have a long way to go in many aspects of Christian formation and daily living. It often seems too hard for me echoing some words of the disciples. My utter need and dependence on God's grace, mercy and compassion an ever growing requisite. The gap is not closing.

The other thing is something that has possibly become obscured by the new lectionary (not so new now) and may have been better realised in the BCP

although I remain unconvinced. This other thing is that the keeping of the Christian year is not an end itself. It is an end that is to contribute to the transformation of the individual Christian, of communities and of the Church into the likeness of Christ. Often referred to as the transformation of the soul. Something of this transformation in the life of an individual can be traced in Frank Sauer's sermon on the Feast of the Epiphany while knowing Frank for some twenty-five years.

What I just now described seems highly desirable, the transformation of the self, but I am aware that most of us, including myself, come kicking and screaming. The pandemic has impacted on people's faith and on communities set aside to worship, follow, serve and to witness to God's redeeming work and presence amongst us. Formation is often not something we desire, especially when it questions today's absorption with self-realisation. Furthermore we have questions in our hearts that are often hidden. Our expectancy and our expectancies may be misplaced. Gott wird das schon richten! God will put things in order, we need not worry! Our faith calls us to use our faculties, all our talents and to apply ourselves in the vagaries of human existence that do not provide the certainties some long for. In other words, a tendency to forget or ignore or simply fail to see what God has entrusted to our hands.

Being an Anglican Christian is an invitation to be a Christian in a particular tradition of the Church drawing heavily and eagerly on the treasures of the past and learning from errors, wrong turns, mistaken confidence, erroneous expectancy, while being aware of the vulnerability summed up in the phrase "the temptations of the world, the flesh and the devil." It is about being open to our future in God, while keeping pace with God in the present, ostensibly willing if not always ready to lay down all that hinders us from eternal joy and the fullness of life.

I end with prayers said at the lighting of the Paschal candle, the Easter candle as it is one of the moments/stations in the Christian year we are making with "the people" of today's gospel on our walk with God.

Christ yesterday and today, the beginning and the end, Alpha and Omega, all time belongs to him, and all ages; to him be glory and power, through every age and for ever. **Amen.** By his holy and glorious wounds may Christ our Lord guard and keep us. **Amen.**