

Homily: Baptism of the Lord 2021

On 13th August 1978 my parents brought me to St Joseph's church in Wesham to be baptised. It's not a day that will feature in the history books of the world; in fact, very little record of the day survives: there are five or six photos of me with various family members, taken later back at home; and there is the brief record in the baptismal register at the church, which only records the date and the names of my parents, godparents and the priest, Fr Bootle, who baptised me. It's really the briefest of records for an event that has shaped my whole life – without that day, I would not have faith; I would not be a follower of Jesus Christ; I would not be stood before you today as a priest.

Today's Gospel also gives us a very brief record of a baptism. St Mark tells us very little about the baptism of Jesus, sharing only a few details of this event. And yet, for all the brevity, this event would change not just the life of Jesus, but our world: from this moment, Jesus begins His public ministry. He sets out on the path that will lead Him to the cross, and therefore to the salvation of the world. And because of this baptism, my baptism, nearly 2000 years later, has meaning. Today, Jesus makes holy the waters of baptism, so that all of us who are baptised receive His grace from this foundational sacrament. There are three aspects of this sacrament I'd like to consider today: that baptism is a beginning, that it is about relationship, and that it is filled with promise.

Baptism is a beginning. Jesus' baptism is the beginning of His ministry. And for us, too, it is a beginning. It is *the* beginning. It is the first sacrament any of us receive; it is the start of a life of faith and discipleship, in which we follow Jesus; it is an entry into the Church. It is a rebirth. In the font, we are born to a new life. Everything is made new.

And in Baptism we enter into relationship. We are baptised in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit – in other words, we are baptised (literally 'immersed') in the life of the Holy Trinity, who in Himself is perfect relationship, perfect love. We become followers of Jesus; we are drawn into friendship with Him; we become His brothers and sisters. And we therefore become children of God, our heavenly Father. At His baptism, Jesus heard the words, "You are my Son, the Beloved; my favour rests on You." St Mark, who narrates the Gospel, doesn't give us any indication that anyone else heard these words. He shares with us this intimate moment between Jesus and His Father – it is a moment in which the adult Jesus, the unique Son of God, was given a deep experience of the love of His heavenly Father. Baptism is all about relationship – not just for Jesus, but for us too. In our baptism, the Father affirms us in the same way: "You are my beloved", He says; in this sacrament, we know ourselves to be His sons and daughters, who are so deeply loved by our heavenly Father. And we become members of the Church, brothers and sisters of one another in Christ. Our relationship with God, our relationships with one another in the Lord – they all spring from this fountain of baptism.

And baptism is filled with promise. The Baptism of Jesus points to many of the Lord's future gifts. Here Jesus goes down into the water before rising up again. It's a sign of His burial, in which He will descend to the tomb, to the underworld of death, before rising to a new and

glorious life. He sees heaven torn open – a sign of the barrier between this life and the next being stripped away. It points us to the moment of His death, when the veil of the Temple was torn in two: every barrier between God and humanity is being torn away by the life, death and resurrection of Christ. Jesus sees the Holy Spirit descend upon Him like a dove after He rises from the water, just as the Holy Spirit will descend upon the Church, the mystical Body of Christ, after He has risen from the dead. In the Baptism of Jesus all this is promised. And our baptism, too, is filled with promise. At that moment, we begin our journey to eternal life. Jesus tears open for us the way to heaven; He invites us to share in His saving death and life-giving resurrection; we receive the promise of salvation.

My baptism, your baptism, may not enter into the history books, but actually our baptism goes beyond history: it opens up the path to eternity. The gifts that we see expressed in Our Lord's baptism today are gifts that are poured out on us: a new beginning, the knowledge that we are beloved children of God, the promise of salvation won for us by His death and resurrection. In baptism, we stand in a river of grace, downstream from our Lord, who has first entered into and sanctified these waters. Let's allow this feast, then, which comes so close to the beginning of our year, to renew us in our baptismal vocation as followers of Christ. Let it be for us a new beginning, a dying to self and rising to a life of greater love, a firm knowledge that we are the beloved children of God, and a promise of eternal salvation in heaven, which is today torn open for us.

Fr Andrew

