

Sermon for Sunday 11 January 2026 – The Baptism of Christ – Revd Simon Pitcher

Isaiah 42.1-9; Psalm 29; Acts 10.34-43; Matthew 3.13-end

In the name of God, Father, Son, and Holy spirit. Please do be seated.

Today is the second Sunday of the season of Epiphany, and today is the Festival of the Baptism of Christ. In the four Sundays of the season of Epiphany, there are four themes which each help us to think about Christ who lived among us. So last week we heard the story of the three wise men visiting from far away, bringing their gifts to worship the Infant Christ. Today, the adult Christ is baptised. Next week, the adult Christ, Jesus, performs the miracle of the wine, turning the water into wine at the wedding feast at Cana. Then we finish the season of Epiphany when the baby Jesus is brought to the temple and Simeon and Anna recognise him as the Christ child. So Jesus changes age during the season of Epiphany. But all the celebrations that we have are about thinking about what it means for Jesus who lived among us.

So today we celebrate the baptism of Jesus in the River Jordan. And in his baptism, Jesus enters into a covenant relationship with the Father. He accepts the commission of his Father to do the work that Jesus is going to do, and he's filled with the Holy Spirit to do that work. And then he claims a people as his own. He enters into a covenant relationship, therefore, with the baptised people that John has prepared. In their baptism, those people are in a covenant relationship with God. At the end of this sermon, we're going to think about some words of covenant promise, too, remembering our baptism and what that might mean for us at the start of this new year.

So, the baptism of Christ. We met John the Baptist, I think it was five weeks ago, in the season of Advent, when we heard John the Baptist calling on the people of Jerusalem to repent because the Kingdom of God was near. He stood in the wilderness, and those who understood his message, came to him and were baptised in the River Jordan as a symbol of their new commitment to God. John the Baptist was doing a new thing in baptising people in the River Jordan. The River Jordan was symbolic. In the Old Testament, Joshua led the people of Israel through the River Jordan into the promised land. The River Jordan was a symbol of crossing from outside to inside, coming home, if you like, to God. John the Baptist is deliberately playing on that story to bring people home from outside through the Jordan, home to the place where they belong with God.

And in his baptism, John would have pushed people right under the water, immersed them under the water as a symbol of dying and of being born again. So dying to an old life, coming out of the water to a new life, washed clean of the old life of selfishness and sin, coming up onto

the bank, made new, rededicated to God. So that was symbolically what John the Baptist was doing. And the remarkable thing about what John the Baptist was doing was he was making a new people of God. So there was baptism in Judaism, but John seems to have used it in a new way. And no longer, from the understanding of John's baptism, no longer was being part of the people of God a genetic thing, an inherited thing. It was about belief and spirit.

So no longer were the people of God only the Jewish people; now John's opened it up to all sorts of other people, to all people. So we read in the gospel, that people came to John from Jerusalem, from all of Judea, from all of the region around the River Jordan and from different backgrounds, cultures, and circumstances. And St Luke tells us in his account that tax collectors and Roman soldiers came to be baptised, too. People who were near, people who were far off, all sorts of different circumstances. If you were a tax collector or a Roman soldier, you couldn't get any further away from God than that in the eyes of their contemporaries. But even they are able to be washed, made new, and start over. So what we can imagine is that John has prepared a new multiracial, multicultural, varied people of God who are now all waiting for God to do something, for their baptism to be fulfilled, for their hopes and expectations to be fulfilled.

So I wonder if we can identify with the people in that crowd. Can we imagine ourselves on the bank with all the other people that John the Baptist has baptised? We are, too, in that crowd. And in our baptism, in our confirmation, we, too, made promises to God, or promises were made to God on our behalf by our Godparents. But we expressed our faith in God. We put our trust in him. And perhaps today we can look back over the course of our lives and we can see where God has blessed us, where God has been there for us. Where has God been present in our lives? Has God made his home with you? Do you feel at home with him? And if so, we can give thanks for those things.

Or perhaps we feel unworthy to be in the crowd. Perhaps we feel that we're not quite accepted, not worthy to be in the crowd. Or perhaps we feel disappointed in the way that things have turned out. We waited expectantly. We're looking back on life, where was God? All those things may well be legitimate thoughts in our minds. I guess all those thoughts were in the minds of the people that John prepared as they wait expectantly.

I hope you enjoyed your Christmas celebrations. We had great joy in those. The joy in the excitement and the mood music of Christmas is all about the fact that Christ, born for us, is the one for whom the crowd of baptised people are waiting for. So in our Christmas celebrations, we have that sense that Christ has come again for us, for who we are now, for our life now. Christ, reborn for us, for who we are today. So we still stand waiting expectantly on the bank for Christ to come to us afresh and make sense for us in our baptised life today. So that's the promise and the joy of Christmas, that he does indeed do that. He comes to us and claims us again.

I was baptised in Kirby in Liverpool on the fifth of January 1964, aged three weeks old, so I can't remember an awful lot about it. My father, my grandfather, my uncle, and my godparents were all Anglican clergymen. So I guess there was a stamp on me from the start, wasn't there? And we'll each of us have our own story as to how God has made us his own, how he has claimed us for that covenant relationship of life that begins at our baptism.

So Jesus comes to be baptised by John the Baptist in the River Jordan. He doesn't need to be made new. He doesn't need to be washed. But in his baptism, he comes to claim all those that John has baptised. Sometimes, I heard it on the radio only yesterday, I think, somebody saying, I'm not prepared to ask anybody to do anything that I'm not prepared to do myself. It was a horse racer, it was a jockey. He said, I'm not prepared to ask a horse to do anything that I'm not prepared to do myself. So you might have heard people say that in work. But Jesus is effectively saying, I'm not prepared to do anything in my human life that others don't go through, too. So in his baptism, Jesus enters fully into the human life that lies before him. So he will go through what we go through. Family. He belonged to a family. He had work to do. He experienced a home life. He had friends. He knew what it was to love and to be loved. He knew betrayal. He knew tiredness. He was misunderstood. He was hated. He was betrayed. He died.

In all in his baptism, Jesus promises to share with us the full reality of what it is to be human. God with us. God who lives among us, makes his home with us and claims as his own all those who John had baptised and were waiting expectantly for him. So Jesus claims us, whoever we are, wherever we are, wherever we are, he claims us as his own. That is his covenant promise in his baptism, accepting the work that the Father gives him to do.

And in our reading from the Book of Acts today, that was read for us by Ashley, we see what God is going to ask of Jesus in his human life to do for us in his life, death, and resurrection, to be filled with the Holy Spirit and equipped to go about doing good, to make the love of God known, to build the Kingdom of God on Earth among his people, to unite us with God, to make God known to us, to enable God to make his home with us, and for us to be able to make our home with him. So we're claimed by God through Jesus as his own. And of course, there is a response then from us. So at the start of the new year, we who are baptised and have been claimed by Christ and made his own, also have to make our covenant response in our life to his covenant response to us.

So I think it was in our Advent course that we heard that John prepared for us about Theresa of Avila, who, of course, wrote, 'Christ has no body now but yours, no hands, no feet on earth but yours. Yours are the eyes through which he looks, compassion on this world. Yours are the feet with which he walks to do good. Yours are the hands with which he blesses all the world. Yours

are the hands, yours are the feet, yours are the eyes. You are his body. Christ has no body now on earth but yours.' And that's what our baptism means, being baptised into him to live our lives on his behalf to make the love of God known. And that means experiencing the same things in our lives that he experienced in his. The opportunity to be loved, but also the opportunity to be misunderstood, the opportunity to be welcomed, but also perhaps the opportunity to be hated. There is a cross, there is a resurrection in baptism. So those are all the thoughts that the baptism of Christ is about. Christ Jesus, who claims us as his own and our response in our baptism, in our confirmation, to claim him as our own and then to live our lives for him as he lived his life for us.

At this time of year, during the reason of Epiphany, the Methodist Church has a Covenant Service which looks at the promise made by Jesus and our response to him, and I wondered whether we might look at those words today in our service. They're in your Pewsheets, and I wondered whether we might together reaffirm our covenant to Christ Jesus as he in his baptism makes his promise to us. So, if you'd like to turn to page 8 of your Pewsheets. I'll come and stand down here with these words.

So God made a covenant with people of Israel, calling them to be a holy nation, chosen to bear witness to his steadfast love by finding delight in the law.

The covenant was renewed in Jesus Christ, our Lord, in his life, work, death and resurrection. In him, all people may be set free from sin and its power and united in love and obedience. In this covenant, God promises us new life in Christ for our part we promise to live no longer for ourselves, but for God. We meet, therefore, as generations have met before us, to renew the covenant which bound them and binds us to God.

So, beloved in Christ, let us claim again for ourselves this covenant which God has made with his people and take upon us the yoke of Christ. And this means that we are content that he appoints us, our place and our work, and that he himself be our reward. Christ has many services to be done. Some are easy, others are difficult. Some bring honour, others bring reproach. Some are suitable to our natural inclinations and material interests. Others are contrary to both. In some, we may please Christ and please ourselves. In others, we cannot please Christ except by denying ourselves. Yet the power to do all these things is given to us in Christ, who strengthens us.

Therefore, I invite you to make this covenant of God, your own, our own. Let us give ourselves to him, trusting in his promises and relying on his grace.

Let us pray. Lord God, Holy Father, since you have called us through Christ to share in this gracious covenant, this mutual belonging, we take upon ourselves with joy the yoke of obedience, and for love of you, engage ourselves to seek and to do your perfect will. We are no longer our own, but yours.

And I invite you, if you would like to, to say these next words together. I am no longer my own but yours. Put me to what you will, rank me with whom you will. Put me to doing, put me to be suffering. Let me be employed for you or laid aside for you, exalted for you or brought low for you. Let me be full, let me be empty, let me have all things, let me have nothing. I freely and wholeheartedly yield all things to your pleasure and disposal. And now, glorious and blessed God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, you are mine and I am yours. So be it. And the covenant now made on earth, let it be ratified in heaven. Amen.