

### ***The Church's prayer for Sunday 9th January***

Heavenly Father,  
at the Jordan you revealed Jesus as your Son:  
may we recognize him as our Lord  
and know ourselves to be your beloved children;  
through Jesus Christ our Saviour.

### **Bible Readings and Reflection for Sunday 9th January**

#### **A reading from Isaiah 43:1-7**

But now thus says the Lord, he who created you, O Jacob, he who formed you, O Israel:

- Do not fear, for I have redeemed you;  
I have called you by name, you are mine.
- <sup>2</sup> When you pass through the waters, I will be with you;  
and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you;  
when you walk through fire you shall not be burned,  
and the flame shall not consume you.
- <sup>3</sup> For I am the Lord your God,  
the Holy One of Israel, your Saviour.  
I give Egypt as your ransom,  
Ethiopia and Seba in exchange for you.
- <sup>4</sup> Because you are precious in my sight,  
and honoured, and I love you,  
I give people in return for you,  
nations in exchange for your life.
- <sup>5</sup> Do not fear, for I am with you;  
I will bring your offspring from the east,  
and from the west I will gather you;
- <sup>6</sup> I will say to the north, 'Give them up',  
and to the south, 'Do not withhold';  
bring my sons from far away  
and my daughters from the end of the earth -
- <sup>7</sup> everyone who is called by my name,  
whom I created for my glory,  
whom I formed and made.'

#### **A Gospel reading from Luke 3:15-17, 21-22**

<sup>15</sup> As the people were filled with expectation, and all were questioning in their hearts concerning John, whether he might be the Messiah,

<sup>16</sup> John answered all of them by saying, 'I baptize you with water; but one who is more powerful than I is coming; I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. <sup>17</sup> His winnowing-fork is in his hand, to clear his threshing-floor and to gather the wheat into his granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire.'



<sup>21</sup> Now when all the people were baptized, and when Jesus also had been baptized and was praying, the heaven was opened, <sup>22</sup> and the Holy Spirit descended upon him in bodily form like a dove. And a voice came from heaven, 'You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.

## **A reflection from Revd Dr Lynda Taylor, Lead Chaplain to Cambridgeshire Police**

Today marks the first Sunday after Epiphany in the church's calendar. Over the past 6 weeks we have travelled steadily from the start of Advent through Christmas to Epiphany. There is a sense in which all three of these Christian seasons or festivals share a strong focus on light and revelation, on coming to perceive and understand things as they truly are. Such a perspective is perhaps heightened for us by the physical darkness of midwinter that routinely surrounds us at this time of year, but also by the metaphorical gloom of the particular times through which we are living, as we continue to face uncertainty and anxiety due to the ongoing pandemic. Nevertheless, our corporate worship over these weeks constantly reminds us that 'the light shines in the darkness and the darkness has not overcome it' (John 1.5).

The word Epiphany comes from the Greek and means 'manifestation' or 'showing'. We began the Epiphany season last week by attending to Matthew's gospel account of the wise men who visited the infant Jesus and his parents in Bethlehem after making a long journey from the East. These were highly educated men who studied the stars and were fascinated by the arc of human history. They had set out on their journey seeking someone special, someone whom they believed would have a significant impact on human history. What they actually found was not at all what they expected – no palace, no crown, no political power base, no military might. Their expectations were totally confounded, and instead their eyes were opened by God to a new kind of future king and kingdom. In the light of this revelation from God, they found themselves bowing down in homage and worship to an infant, presenting him with precious - and highly symbolic - gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh. Following this intensely personal encounter and in response to God's further prompting, the wise men return home via a different route. After meeting God face to face, their own lives no doubt also took a rather different course.

This theme of revelation is also at the heart of this week's Bible passages, both our gospel account from Luke and our Old Testament passage from the prophet Isaiah. In both passages we can discern a particular focus on the revelation of one's identity and calling. In our gospel passage from Luke we seem to be caught up in an unexpected experience of 'time-travel'. From the birth and early years narratives of John and Jesus in chapters 1 and 2, Luke suddenly catapults us forwards a couple of decades to their adult years. He introduces us first to the adult John, now an itinerant preacher along the banks of the Jordan river – a colourful and charismatic figure in the style of the ancient Jewish prophets. Quoting the prophet Isaiah's call to salvation, John preaches a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. In doing so, John is seriously challenging the contemporary religious status quo - including traditional Jewish assumptions about Abrahamic identity and legacy. John's preaching provokes a variety of responses from the crowds who gather to listen to him,



crowds that include both Jews and non-Jews from all walks of life. Some are entertained by the spectacle of a preacher dressed in a camel-hair garment and leather girdle who lives on locusts and wild honey; others are deeply convicted in their hearts and minds and respond by seeking baptism in the Jordan. But many of those listening to John are simply intrigued by the identity of this figure who echoes the words of the Old Testament prophets and so they wonder if he is the One the Jewish people have been waiting for down the centuries, the One God promised – the Anointed One, the Messiah, the Christ.

John has an unequivocal answer for those who are asking themselves questions such as 'Who is this man?' and 'Could he actually be the long-promised, long-awaited Messiah?'

'No', says John, 'that is not who I am. That is not my identity and calling'. And John goes on to differentiate his identity and his calling very clearly from that of the One who will follow him. Both will baptise – but one will baptise with water and the other with the Holy Spirit and fire. Both will proclaim the way of the Lord and the kingdom of God, but only one of them is authorised to deliver judgement. John is very clear in his own mind about who is the greater of the two and what the nature of their relationship is to God and to one another. We can only suppose that John's background and upbringing had a role to play in his self-understanding. Perhaps his elderly parents, Zechariah and Elizabeth, had been able to explain to John something of his miraculous origins and the special destiny assigned to him by God – a destiny that is outlined in the words of the Benedictus recorded in Luke 1. Or perhaps John's long years in the wilderness prior to his preaching ministry along the Jordan brought a growing revelation for him of his identity and calling. However it came about, it seems that John was sure in the knowledge of who he was and what he was called to by God – whether in life or death.

In Luke's gospel account, John's powerful assertion concerning his own identity and calling is followed a few verses later by an account of Jesus being baptised by John in the Jordan river. The baptism of Jesus is recorded not just in Luke, but also in Matthew, Mark and John, suggesting that it is an event of huge significance in the overall gospel story – on a par perhaps with the crucifixion and resurrection narratives. The details differ in certain respects across the four gospel accounts, but the essential content is the same: the heavens open; the Spirit of God alights on Jesus in the form of a dove; and the voice of God expresses words of personal affirmation and approval.

In all four gospel narratives, Jesus' baptism seems to be the springboard from which he will embark on his public ministry. Following his baptism by John in the River Jordan, we can imagine Jesus transferring his attention, his skills and his energy away from doing the earlier work of his earthly father, Joseph, to take up the work of his heavenly Father, God. The bench of a carpenter's workshop in the village of Nazareth is replaced by the workbench of the wider world, where a master builder's skills are desperately needed for both the creation of new things and the restoration of old things.

More importantly, perhaps, Jesus' baptism is the event that confirms or seals his identity as the Son of God. This moment is more than just a public statement for those who were present at that event and had eyes to see and ears to hear God's presence in sign and word. I've always thought Jesus' baptism must have provided Jesus with a deep personal



affirmation at this point in his earthly life and in advance of what was to come. Jesus' public ministry has not yet begun, and yet God says to him 'You are my beloved Son; with you I am well pleased'. The Father-Son relationship is not premised on Jesus' achievements or accomplishments. Instead, it is a relationship of unconditional love and recognition. And our own baptism, whether we remember it or not, is a significant moment in our lives we should also hold onto with confidence. It confirms our place in God's family as a beloved child for all eternity.

The Holy Spirit, who is visibly present at Jesus' baptism, then accompanies God's beloved Son into the desert for an extended 'retreat'. We can imagine this will be a period for Jesus to reflect on his identity and calling as God's beloved son. At the end of this period, Jesus faces a time of interrogation and examination – perhaps a final stage of his apprenticeship journey? Three times Jesus' finds his identity and status questioned in an attempt to undermine his sense of who is really is and his relationship with God. Three times Jesus is tempted to follow a different path, to compromise his relationship with his Father. The challenging questions posed to Jesus are along the lines of: Are you really the Son of God? Is God really your Father? And even if he is, do you really need to depend on God to provide for all your needs and to protect you from danger? Wouldn't it be better to take the initiative yourself, to exercise power in your own right?

In countering these challenges to his identity and the nature of his calling, it is notable that Jesus draws on his knowledge of Scripture to resist and to stand firm. After a lifetime spent in his local synagogue, Jesus knows his Hebrew scriptures well, so well that he is able to quote passages from Deuteronomy to counter distortions of the truth. He uses words of scripture like a sword and shield to defend himself and to stand firm in his relationship with God the Father. And I think Jesus calls us too to follow his example - to read, mark, learn and inwardly digest scripture so that it may stand us in good stead in times of doubt, disappointment and despair.

It is thanks to his baptismal experience and his later 'dwelling in the word of God' that Jesus emerges from his time in the wilderness secure in the knowledge and faith that he is God's beloved son, and confident in his understanding of the vocation to which his Father is calling him.

So what of our own sense of identity and calling – as disciples of Jesus and as members of God's family here on earth? How confident are we of being God's beloved children? And what is our understanding of the vocation to which God is calling us in this time and place?

The past two years have sometimes seemed like a period of extended testing in the wilderness. Like Jesus in the desert, we have sometimes felt challenged about our identity and vocation as 'church' – nationally, regionally and locally? As rural churches in the Lordsbridge Team - some of us very small and fragile, we have been posed some difficult questions: How can we still be church during a global pandemic? What should/will church life look like? Should we think about doing things differently for the future? Such questions are valid and necessary, but they should not distract us from asking and answering the really



important questions about our identity and calling as individual Christians and as Christian communities: Who are we really? What is God really calling us to in our time and place?

Jesus' own baptism reminds us that, as his brothers and sisters, we too are beloved of God – individually and corporately; we are loved with an unconditional love that knows no bounds and has no end. That must be the firm foundation for how we live day by day, as well and the springboard for what we decide to do going forward – both as individuals and as church communities. As we move into a new year with all its human uncertainties and anxieties, may we take not only comfort from this truth about our identity as God's beloved children but also inspiration to rekindle our baptismal calling and to shine as a light in the world to the glory of God our Father. Amen.