

## **Sermon 09 January 2022 – Baptism, Restoration, God's glory**

Today is the first Sunday after Epiphany – which was celebrated on Thursday 6 January. Epiphany is the manifestation, appearance or the revelation of Jesus Christ to the Gentiles. This is represented by the Magi when they recognized the baby Jesus as the Son of God.

Our readings today describe God's action/revelation in different ways through God's voice – in the psalm and at Jesus baptism, through water and the spirit in the second reading and the Gospel. We see the different ways God's glory – God's power and presence - is revealed, in and through creation, the people of Israel, Jesus Christ and humanity.

In the first reading, Isaiah, speaks words of encouragement and tells of God's promises of restoration and protection to a people who faced an uncertain future. Isaiah motivates them – an exiled people - to embrace their faith and return to Jerusalem to rebuild. He reminds them that they can trust in God's promises because they are God's very own. Listen again to what Isaiah writes - The God "who created you", "who formed you", has "redeemed you; and "called you by name" (v1), "you are precious in my sight, and honoured, and I love you," (v4). "Do not fear, for I am with you;" (v5) I will gather "everyone who is called by my name, whom I created for my glory, whom I formed and made." (v6-7). What beautiful words – to be told that you are loved, precious and honoured. Called by name and created for God's glory. These words may have been written centuries ago to the people of Israel, but they certainly apply to us today as well. We too have been called by name – through baptism. We too, are loved by God and precious in his sight. We too, have been created – formed – to reveal God's presence in the world and to be God's presence in the world. Do we believe that calls us – each one us - by name, not only to worship him but to reveal him to others?

In the psalm, we are confronted with vivid imagery describing a God who speaks. Whose voice reveals God's glory in nature. Through the psalm we hear the powerful voice of God calling us. Calling us with "power and gentleness", "majesty and blessing." "Calling us with great joy and welcome, inviting us to gather, to worship and honour the wonders and truth of the Lord our God." ([http://www.thetimelesspsalms.net/pdfs/epiphany1a\\_2014.pdf](http://www.thetimelesspsalms.net/pdfs/epiphany1a_2014.pdf)). Alongside all of creation, we are called to worship God – to hear his voice and see his glory. This same voice that shakes the heavens and the earth - thundering throughout all creation – is the voice that is heard at Jesus' baptism – declaring Jesus to be God's beloved Son. It is the voice of a

God who speaks throughout the ages, from generation to generation. A voice that still speaks to us today! A voice that tells us we are Gods beloved children. Are we listening?

The Acts reading is a bit strange. Firstly, we don't get a sense of the context. You would need to read from verse 1 to get that. The context is that the church in Jerusalem was being persecuted and everyone, "except the apostles were scattered throughout the countryside of Judea and Samaria." (Acts 8: 1). Despite being scattered the believers continued to preach the good news. It is Philip, who goes to Samaria, proclaiming the good news about the kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Christ" (8:5-12). It is Philip who baptises all who believe the message he proclaimed. What we see here is that focus of mission shifts from Jerusalem to other areas – Gentile areas. And it is at this point that today's passage picks up telling us that the apostles in Jerusalem heard about what had happened in Samaria and then sent Peter and John to them. This then brings us to the second peculiar aspect which is the separation of baptism from the gift of the Holy Spirit. Philip had already baptised the Samaritans, but only now when Peter and John come and lay hands on them, do they receive the Holy Spirit. And the reason I say this is peculiar is because, generally, in Acts, people receive the Holy Spirit before being baptised or when they are baptised. The two generally go together. But not in this passage.

In the Gospel passage we meet John the Baptist who is preaching a baptism of repentance. And the people are so taken up with his preaching that they even wonder if he is the Messiah. John quickly puts them straight indicating that the Messiah is yet to come. It's interesting that in this passage John says that he baptises with water, but that the one coming after him – whom we know is Jesus - will baptize with the "Holy Spirit and fire". John says that the one who comes after him will separate the wheat from the chaff, clearly this not something John can do. Often, we seem to think that separating wheat from chaff is about separating people into two groups - one of "bad" people and the other of "good" people. (Something we are all rather good at). Instead, it is about separating that which is useful from that which is not. Which means we should probably see it as separating the good that is within each person from the bad that is within each person. (David Ewart, [www.holytextures.com](http://www.holytextures.com)) Afterall each of us has the potential for both good and bad. Here too, as in the Acts reading, there seems to be a separation of baptism from the gift of the Holy Spirit.

But then we are told that when Jesus is baptized, something different happens. The heaven is opened, the "Holy Spirit descended upon him" and "a voice came from heaven,

“You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.” What we learn from this is that the Holy Spirit is a gift from God. It is God’s action, not humanity’s. Just as Philip and John baptized with water, so too do we baptize with water. But it is God’s action at our baptism that fills us with the presence of God’s Spirit – the Holy Spirit. It is God at work in our lives – separating the wheat from the chaff. It is God at work breaking down barriers revealing himself to us in new and different ways.

This I believe is what happened in the story from Acts. It was God’s action through Peter and John that caused the Samaritans to receive the Holy Spirit. And it was God’s action that was breaking down barriers between the Jewish and Samaritan believers.

God’s action through Jesus’ baptism sets him on a path of mission and ministry. He does not go back to Nazareth - to his old life. God’s action changes everything and throughout Jesus’s life and ministry God continually reveals God’s self and God’s ways. Jesus shared God’s love and presence with all. And as we reflect on Jesus’ baptism and God’s action in the world through his voice, spirit and water, we are faced with the opportunity of reflecting, not only on our own baptisms, but also on God’s action in our lives through the Holy Spirit. We too, are called to make known God’s power and presence – God’s glory - in our lives. We do this through worship and the way in which we live our lives – so that others may see and feel God’s power and presence in their lives and the world around them.

Marianne Williamson writes,

**“Our deepest fear is not that we are inadequate. Our deepest fear is that we are powerful beyond measure. It is our light, not our darkness that most frightens us. We ask ourselves, 'Who am I to be brilliant, gorgeous, talented, fabulous?' Actually, who are you not to be? You are a child of God.”** (Marianne Williamson, [www.goodreads.com/quotes](http://www.goodreads.com/quotes))

Dear people of God, we are indeed God’s own! Whatever this year holds for each one of us, remember there is nothing to fear. Let us hold onto the message from Isaiah – God has “formed you”, “redeemed you; and “called you by name”. “You are precious in his sight”, “honoured” and “loved”. “Do not fear, for I am with you;” (v5) I will gather “everyone who is called by my name, whom I created for my glory, whom I formed and made.” I pray that as baptized people we will remember to share God’s revelation in our lives with others, as Jesus did. Amen