

Mark 1 vs 4-11

⁴And so John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness, preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. ⁵The whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem went out to him. Confessing their sins, they were baptized by him in the Jordan River. ⁶John wore clothing made of camel's hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey. ⁷And this was his message: "After me comes the one more powerful than I, the straps of whose sandals I am not worthy to stoop down and untie. ⁸I baptize you with[a] water, but he will baptize you with[b] the Holy Spirit."

⁹ At that time Jesus came from Nazareth in Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. ¹⁰ Just as Jesus was coming up out of the water, he saw heaven being torn open and the Spirit descending on him like a dove. ¹¹ And a voice came from heaven: "You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased."

The Baptism of Christ – New Beginnings

Last year, when I preached on Christ's Baptism during the All Age Service, using the verses from Matthew Chapter 3, I explored how this episode provides us with some insight into the humility and humbleness that Jesus Christ exhibited - an individual who was born in a stable, became a refugee fleeing to Egypt and was brought up in Nazareth as the son of a carpenter.

His humility in the trek to be baptised, doing the proper and righteous thing in being baptised, being anointed with the Holy Spirit in the peaceful and humble image of a dove, and then even when God himself proclaims him as his son and that his is well pleased with him, his response, led by the Holy Spirit is to spend time fasting and praying.

This evening, I'd like to take a different message from Mark's passage... that of **New Beginnings**. And it's probably not a coincidence that the celebration of Christ's baptism and the beginning of his ministry falls so close to Christmas and especially our New Year where we so often strive to make our own new beginnings...

But first a bit about Mark's gospel. Scholars have commented that it is written in a different style to the other two synoptic Gospels, despite the similarities in their accounts of Jesus' life and ministry. It is written with a pace that is rapid and to the point, almost like an action story and is generally regarded as being the first gospel written and used as source material for Matthew and Luke.

The brevity with which the Baptism story is described in Mark, may to some extent be down to the fact that most of the apostles were still alive and spreading the Good News across Judea and the Roman Empire. Mark's Gospel gets to the point and does not waste words in describing the life and ministry of Jesus. It keeps your interest, and gives the reader a well-constructed synopsis of the purpose of Jesus' ministry, to show that Jesus was here to bring salvation to His people. That might go one way to explaining why when I did the Alpha Course many years ago, the Vicar handed out copies of Mark's gospel and recommended starting with it.

From Mark's perspective, the beginning is not the Christmas Story of the Nativity that we have just celebrated, but the Baptism of Christ, when God declared Jesus to be his beloved son.

So, let's start with the scripture... verses 4-8 quickly cover the activities of John the Baptist – a preacher possessing the quality of character approved by God. So much so, that multitudes of people came to him convinced of their need to change their ways in preparation for the coming Messiah.

John had the character to call people to repent – to tell people what they needed to hear rather than what they wanted to believe.

John had the character to be poor. He ate what was available to him in nature. Locusts and wild honey could be found in nature and did not cost money. Camel hair clothing was meant for labouring outdoors and identified him with the prophet Elijah. John was not taking offerings and was not dependent on his followers for earning money. He was financially free from compromise.

John had the character to recognize the limits of his purpose. He admitted that he was not the Christ. When the Christ came, he called him out as the one who is to come, whose sandals he was not worthy to untie. Once the Christ came, John the Baptist understood that his mission would soon come to an end and a new mission would begin.

John is urging the people to repent and be baptized, to seek forgiveness and start a new life.

In the same way that the people are starting a new life, so is Jesus. Whilst Jesus is sinless and has no need to repent, he is leaving his old life behind and beginning a new life of ministry, surrendering to God's will for his life. In this first act of being baptized he is showing us all that he stands in our place in obedience to God.

And this new beginning, where Jesus accepts that he is the Messiah, the Lamb of God who would take away the sins of the world, gets recognized - the sky is torn open and Jesus receives the power of the Holy Spirit, with God's voice saying, "You are my Son, whom I love, with you I am well pleased."

So what can we learn from this new beginning?

This baptism is all about Jesus standing in our place

we do need to be obedient to God as he was,

we do need to be baptised and

we do need the power of the Holy Spirit

We can all have the characteristics of John as mentioned previously, but if we want to be effective as Christians – seeing God do incredible things through us and with us; if we want to feel God’s peace and grace; if we want to be witnesses to the glory of God to our community here in Olney then we need what Jesus had. We all need to be as full of the spiritual power of God as Jesus was each and every day.

So let us pray.

Heavenly Father, thank You for Your word and the wonderful truth that it contains.

Thank You that Jesus set aside His heavenly glory and took upon Himself the humble status of a Servant of all... so that He could identify with our humanity and pay the price for our sin.

Give us the peace of mind and generosity of heart that we may obediently follow in His footsteps, witness to your love and forge a new beginning through your Grace and in the power of the Holy Spirit

Amen