

**ANGLICAN CHAPLAINCY OF ALL SAINTS' MARSEILLE
WITH AIX-EN-PROVENCE AND THE LUBERON**

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The Baptism of Christ

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Today we hear from Luke about John preaching about the Messiah and the baptism of Christ. As he says, everyone was expecting the Messiah to come soon, and were eager to know if John was the Messiah. But John was very clear that he wasn't, he was just the messenger. In fact he was God's last messenger, the last one sent to warn the people that they needed to come back to God and how he wanted them to live.

To emphasise the point of just how inferior John perceived himself to be in relation to the Messiah, he tells the crowds that he isn't worthy to be his slave and untie the straps of his sandals. That might seem a bit odd to us, nowadays, but at that time only slaves, the lowest of the low, would untie sandals. There were no lovely tarmac roads then, no road sweepers, no little trucks ambling up and down pavements hosing them down after market day as we have here. People wore sandals to pick their way through dust and dirt, to farm and to garden, and by the end of the day their feet would be filthy. So no-one would want to touch those feet – and so it was a slave, who had no choice, who had to undo the sandals and wash the feet of their owners. So John is making it a huge gulf between him and the Messiah, which must have added to the awe and expectation of the crowds. If this man who preached so well and did so many great things was just like a slave, how much greater and more amazing would the Messiah be?

John loses no time in giving them an example – I baptise you with water – he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire. The Old Testament prophets Joel, Ezekiel and Isaiah had all predicted that in the last days, God would pour out his

Spirit on his people. Fire is a powerful cleanser – we’ve seen so many times recently how fires can wipe out enormous areas of land, out of our control certainly. So this coming Messiah has great power. But fire is also an image of judgement, and this is something that we don’t really spend too much time on nowadays, the judgement of Christ. We focus more on his teaching, how to live good lives, forgiveness, all the comforting side of believing in him. But he and John were clear that he wasn’t just coming to heal and comfort, he was also coming to judge. Just as in the wheat harvest when the heads of corn are whacked to dislodge them from their stalks and then thrown up in the air to separate the useless outside bits which would blow away from the corn inside. Literally separating the wheat from the chaff; so the Messiah would throw humanity up in the air and separate out the good and useful from the bad and useless. The useless would then be burnt, disposed of. Which is a very sobering thought. We will be judged. What if today were to be the last day, the day when Christ returns to judge us? No more time to set to and clean up our act, to make up for the things we aren’t proud of?

A very long time ago, when I was at school, our eventual grades would depend upon our results in exams. So you could amble along for a couple of years without putting in too much effort, providing you could swot like mad for a few weeks before the exams and still get straight A’s, ready for university or a good job. Then the academic authorities brought in continual assessment and portfolios, which meant that students had to consistently perform at the higher level. Much harder to do – to consistently work hard and perform at a high level. Which is where we are at with God and his judgement by Christ. We are on continual assessment – there may not be time to swot up and improve our grades. Some of us of course will have led good and Christian lives and have nothing to worry about – but perhaps we need to be sure of that!

Then we have the baptism of Christ, marking the start of his ministry. On the surface, there is a stark contrast between the image being painted by John of the Messiah and how great he will be, and this 30 year old, apparently ordinary man, coming along with the rest of the crowds to be baptised by water. No roaring fires, no loud trumpets, no hordes of angels or anything at all out of the ordinary. No special treatment. Just one more man coming to John, to be dunked in the river. He humbly presents himself, and prays. All the way through the gospels, we are told of Jesus praying, praying hard and long. He prays constantly, talking to his

Father, asking for guidance, for help. It's certainly an object lesson to me, that if Christ himself, the Messiah, put so much effort into praying, shouldn't I be doing the same? It makes me think that rather than getting all bound up in my small everyday doings, perhaps I should be thinking about doing it alongside Christ, inviting him to be my companion along the way.

I do wonder what Jesus was praying for though? This is the start of his ministry. He's had 30 years of normal human life, living with his family, taking on the role of head of the family after Joseph died, caring for his mother and siblings, working, spending time with friends, all the usual things. And now he's being baptised and is going to enter the final lap of his earthly life. Does he know how it's going to progress? Where it's going to end? He's going to take a path which will take him away from his family and trade to a life of wandering around the region, preaching, healing, performing astonishing miracles, getting into trouble with the authorities. Does he know about that – is he praying for help with that, or guidance, or is he rather dreading it, nervous and needing support? Is he full of trepidation? Or is he looking forward to it? Is he like so many after him, feeling the call of God to serve Him, not at all sure it's the right thing for him but finding it an irresistible call?

We'll never know, we humans can only think how we would be feeling. But reassurance and confirmation come as the Holy Spirit in bodily form, descends upon him like a dove. I wonder about that image – does it mean the Holy Spirit looked like a dove, or does it mean it fluttered down and landed as gently as a bird lands on your hand? Either way, he is filled with the Holy Spirit. And then comes the voice from heaven, confirming Jesus as God's dearly loved Son, bringing Him great joy. So whatever doubts and dilemmas Jesus may have been facing, he is now identified as the Messiah, as God's Son and he knows that he is doing God's will and pleasing him. His life has changed forever.

And thanks to him, so have our lives, and all the millions who have believed in him and done their best to honour him and obey his commands over the centuries.

Amen.