

## Baptism of Christ 2021

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Shortly after I got engaged to my late husband, my future father-in-law decided that it would be a good idea for me to have a trip in the family sailing boat. I did warn him that I have the unfortunate ability to be motion sick in any form of transport, but of course, he didn't believe me, told me I'd be fine, and we boarded the boat, true to form we had not even left Chichester before I was hanging over the side...

The ancient Jews didn't enjoy was sailing either- Not because, like me, they couldn't leave the harbour without being sick, but because it was dangerous, and wherever possible they kept their feet firmly on dry land. They thought of the sea as an alien element. Water meant chaos, lack of order, danger and rebellion. We've all seen the destruction water can cause in tsunamis and even local flooding in our own country.

On the other hand, neither ancient Jews nor modern Britons could survive for long without water. Our bodies are largely made up of water; not only we but all the plants and animals on which we depend for food need water to survive. Water is the element which brings life; a place with no water is a place of death.

At the very beginning of the Bible water is portrayed as both chaotic and creative. It is the chaos which God has to subdue in order to make a world, and it is also the creative raw material from which God produces everything else that is, but there is a pretty big hint in the story as to what makes the difference between destructive and creative water, when it says that the Spirit of God brooded over the waters. Where the Spirit of God is not, there is chaos and disorder. When the Holy Spirit comes, order, creation and harmony are brought about.

Keep all those thoughts about water in your minds as we go on to think about what we are celebrating today. We are remembering the baptism of Jesus.

Baptisms tend to involve a lot of water. In our church we usually only pour a couple of scoopfuls over the head of the candidate, but when John the Baptist invented baptism, he administered it in the River Jordan, and the candidates were literally soaked, ducked right under the surface of the river and held there for several seconds before John released them to come up gasping and spluttering for air. It was a very dramatic ceremony, and it was being given for the forgiveness of sins. It was as if John was really drowning the bad old person, plunging them into the chaos of the water, so that they could come out fresh and new to begin a new life in a new direction. The going into the water was the destructive bit, drowning and washing away sin; the coming up was the creative bit, breathing in with that first gulp of air the new life of God.

So, why did Jesus need to be baptised if he was without sin? Well it seems as though he wanted to identify himself as closely as possible with the people he came to save. For Jesus

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it was a way of entering the experience of sinful men and women, of saying to God, 'Count me in. When you look at the human race, I want you to see me among them. I don't want to be separated, sitting on some holy mountain being venerated; I want to be down here among my brothers and sisters, sharing their lives in their search for you.'

So as Jesus is ducked down into the chaotic waters of the river, he is immersing himself in the heartbreak and the problems and the experience of being a human being, someone who is incomplete and muddled yet has the ability to reach out to God. And as he comes up out of the water, the same miracle happens as happened on the first day of creation- there once again is the Holy Spirit, moving over the waters in the shape of a dove. There is the voice of God the Father, speaking a creative word.

Today we find ourselves in a chaotic and frightening world, we may feel like we're drowning in the news of disease, and the sense of anxiety. But Jesus has chosen to enter the waters with us and the transforming Spirit in our lives will bring order out of this chaos and in our world.

Jesus is with you in this, you can cling to him and together we call upon the Spirit to breakthrough and restore us and our world.