



10 January 2021
The Baptism of Jesus
Acts 19.1–7 | Mark 1.4–11
St James's Piccadilly
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THE SUN ALSO RISES

We are holding out in our household and keeping the Christmas tree for the rest of the Epiphany season, all the way to Candlemas, February 2nd. We just need that sign of life just a little bit longer, that sig that despite everything else, there is light and life does go on.

There is a 16th century choral composition that sums up this journey from Epiphany, last week, to today, the baptism of Christ, and to public presentation at the wedding in Cana. It is called in Latin *Tribus miraculis* (Luca Marenzio, d. 1599), referring to these three miracles showing Jesus to the whole world. The words set to music say '*Hodie stella magos duxit...*

Today the star led the Magi to the manger.
Today water was made into wine at the wedding feast.
Today Christ willed to be baptised in the Jordan that we might be saved. Alleluia.¹

These three signs, on the final day of January, will be revealed to be in fact the fulfilment of Simeon's prophecy at the presentation in the temple, that Jesus is "a light for revelation to the nations, and the glory of his people Israel." These are the signs of Jesus.

But the other side of that coin is that, in proclaiming this, the Church itself becomes a sign to the world that, despite everything else, life goes on.

We sadly couldn't hold the baptism we had planned for today after the service. In performing a baptism the Church is also re-living its own calling to a faith journey. In the service of baptism, we ask the person being baptised "Do you turn to

¹ *Tribus miraculis ornatum, diem sanctum colimus:
Hodie stella Magos duxit ad praeseptum:
Hodie vinum ex aqua factum est ad nuptias:
Hodie in Jordane a Joanne Christus baptizari voluit,
ut salvaret nos, Alleluia.*

Christ? Do you repent of your sins? Do you renounce evil? Do you believe and trust in the Holy Spirit?" As we ask those questions of the person being baptised, we also ask them of ourselves as priest and congregation: every act of baptism is also the Church's baptism.

Baptism gives someone a new direction in life, it says 'This is who you are. This is your life's journey'. But there is something about the way in which someone coming into faith as a new Christian reflects back to us who have been in the Church for however long and says:

This is who you are.
This is your journey.
This is your unveiling, too.

* * *

The American poet, Maya Angelou, was asked some ten years before she died, "What is the task you have set yourself before you die?" She said, "There are so many things ..." Then, after a pause, she said: "I want TO BE a Christians. ... To *be* it. I really would like *to be it*." This must be what the Apostle Paul has in mind when says in his letter to the Romans "Do you not know that 'the same Spirit who raised Jesus from the dead is alive and well and dwelling in you..?' (Romans 8.11)²

That alone should be an entire sermon. I hope I never have to preach it; I mean not in so many words. Because that is a sermon you *live with your whole life*. This is how we hear it in our first reading from Acts: "On hearing this, they were baptized in the name of the Jesus as Lord ... and the Holy Spirit came upon them" We are mortal creatures. But that we live by the Spirit simply *is* the case.

In the baptism stories in Matthew, Mark and Luke, we see Jesus exposed publicly in that revealing light of the Holy Spirit. In John's Gospel we see another side to this: Jesus himself commissions baptism. So we have this picture of the baptism of Jesus in the gospels: the Son of God stoops to receive baptism. And in that very gesture, Jesus

² "If the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, he who raised Christ from the dead will give life to your mortal bodies also through his Spirit that dwells in you."

commissions our unveiling as a church born of water and the Spirit.

Why does this matter? The Gospel writes are saying to us: 'Christian, your journey is a two-way street: your baptism is a mutual surrender of direction and purpose; an exchange of life for life. That's what makes us signs to the world: to be a Christian is to be always at the crossroads of life and more life.

But what happens when, let's face it, the virus has chased us out of our churches; we've had to retreat back into our homes? (We know that's the only way we can see out this pandemic ... so, yes, please, stay as you are, where you are: This is how we take care of one another, how we love our neighbour as ourselves, how we live our love of neighbour in this fragile city at this time.) But how do we become signs of life when this pandemic has upended the lives the world over and all around us?

I think this is a time when we say to one another "Let's not let the virus upend our purpose!"

The church is not a mausoleum. It is a place for the living. I think of blessed Jocelyn Henry. I think it was just over year and a half ago that she was dancing here, with her stick, with Lucy playing Abba on the piano. This is who is hosting us in this place, even as Christ, across the distance separating us, makes us guests around his communion table.



So, whatever form our Sunday worship takes, let's not let this virus re-define who we are or what it means to belong to this gathering of faces week on week.

Here at St James's, we sometimes talk about the "radical welcome" of Christ's Gospel; and oftentimes we want to push that radical edge of the gospel to a disruptive and transgressive way of living our faith. But there is also a part of us that, when it comes to it, we just want what everyone else wants: to see the sunrise in the morning. I'm beginning to think there's nothing wrong with that. Let me illustrate what I mean.

* * *

I have something up my sleeve, literally up my sleeve; I want to show it to you.

This is a replica of a cross made of bog peat that was used in Ireland by both Catholic Christians and Protestant Christians. What they had in common was that, during Cromwell's period, they refused to conform to the state church, the Anglican

Church. If you were suspected of having beliefs that were different from the approved state religion, if you were found to have in your home an icon or a cross or some other symbol of a faith which other people condemned as transgressive, that meant your life. But people simply wanted to be faithful to the Christian faith they had received in the churches where they had received it. That

was considered an act of treason in what became known as the period of the Penal Code in Ireland.

The idea with this cross was that, if you had warning that there were soldiers coming through your village—if you heard boots making their way house-to-house up your street—you would take this cross down from above the fireplace, and you would slip it up your sleeve.

Whatever happened, Catholic or Protestant, you faced it knowing that your faith was not simply a part of you, and it wasn't something outside of you, you held the cross, and you knew your faith was something you lived from the inside out.

That was the moment you heard your baptismal call once again, when you heard that voice, *Christian, this is your journey; this is who you are.*

In her poem "I know why the caged bird sings", Maya Angelou, says the answer is that the bird knows who it is: the bird sings because it knows that it is born for freedom

*a caged bird stands on the grave of dreams ...
so he opens his throat to sing.
The caged bird sings with a fearful trill ...
and his tune is heard on the distant hill
for the caged bird sings of freedom.*

* * *

Wherever you are today, you might be vocal in your faith, you might feel not particularly bold. At this time of lockdown, you might feel the opposite or radical and disruptive; you might simply find the Spirit meeting you in an inward sense of belonging and of your connection to this place. Faith doesn't have to be something you strive for, or a time of some great unveiling and upheaval: if you do nothing else, you are already living the miracle, or do you not know that "the Spirit who raised Jesus from the dead is the Spirit that dwells within you."

* * *

One final thought: I always find the book of Ecclesiastes, not exactly comforting, but certainly liberating. It is partly the fact that the same poet who wrote "Vanity, vanity, everything is vanity" is the same poet who also wrote "To everything there is a season, and a time for every purpose

under heaven ..." It is also the fact that oftentimes this is the only voice willing to tell me that I am not the centre of the universe, and that the problems I am going through look very different when seen against the big scheme of things, and that the lives we were living now, other people have lived before. This isn't exactly comforting, but perhaps you will hear this too in a way that you find freeing. So let me conclude by reading a few lines from this word of ancient wisdom:

*The sun also rises.
And the sun goes down
and hastens to the place where it arose.
The wind blows towards the south,
and turns around to the north;
the wind whirls about continually,
and comes back round on its circuit.
All the rivers run into the sea,
yet the sea is never full ...
and to the place from which the rivers come,
there they return again.
That which has been is what will be,
that which is done is what will be done,
and there is nothing new under the sun.*

So, in these days of pandemic and restrictions and lockdown and frankly of horrendous news,

There is day and there is night.
But the sun also rises.

Amen.