

Genesis 1: 1-5  
Psalm 29  
Acts 19: 1-7  
St. Mark 1: 4-11

Baptism of the Lord 2024

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“They were baptized in the Name of the Lord Jesus.” Acts 19: 5b

Some Church buildings are decorated quite plainly; others with great detail... Particularly if we happen to go into one of the churches from the eastern Christian tradition – say, a Greek Orthodox church or a Russian Orthodox church or perhaps an Armenian Orthodox church, one of the first things we will notice are very large stylized paintings, called *icons*. The icons are not ends in themselves, but they are representations to teach us more about following Jesus Christ. Icons can emphasize some aspect of the Lord Jesus, such as his death, resurrection or miracles. Other icons are of the saints – the Blessed Virgin Mary, or one of the apostles, or a great teacher or martyr – but they are always some quality of faith being emphasized, for you and for me...

Some Anglican parishes have icons in prominent positions, such as near the baptismal font; others do not. In Anglican parishes, the icons tend to be somewhat smaller; a little more under-stated... Some of you will have noticed a couple of small icons in the office, such as this one, of the crowd praising Jesus as he enters Jerusalem. Jesus is looking back at the hesitant apostles, encouraging them to come to where he will shortly be crucified. One of you very kindly gave this to me as a gift...

Back to the large icons in Orthodox parishes. Almost certainly, one of the large icons in an Orthodox parish will be of John the Baptizer. John the Baptist prepared people for the coming of the Messiah, by preaching and by a baptism of repentance. The washing of water on the outside was a sign of the inner cleansing, as our hearts turn toward the Lord. John the Baptist is held in especially high regard in the eastern Christian tradition...

Today, we start the season of Epiphany by recalling the Baptism of Jesus Christ by John the Baptist. This is an especially important observance by the eastern Christians, and as many churches are (finally!) learning to work together more, many other denominations recall the Baptism of the Lord today – including Anglican Christians...

So, there is John the Baptist, looking wild and preaching a strange and magnetic message, that we all are to turn around from our sinful ways, and to live beautifully for the living God... Some rather dubious people are going into the Jordan River – Roman soldiers and tax collectors and so on. They are dunked under the water by John the Baptist, as a sign of this inner commitment to live God’s way...

One day, Jesus of Nazareth, John’s cousin, comes along. Until this point, as far as we know, Jesus of Nazareth has been working as a carpenter, for it was the custom in that culture for a son to learn his father’s trade...

Jesus wants to be baptized too. John rightly realizes that Jesus has done nothing that he needs to repent *from*! But the Lord Jesus presses John, who finally complies and baptizes Jesus... It is, Jesus says, the fulfilment of an ancient plan...

Something new begins with Jesus' baptism. The Holy Spirit comes and dwells. On-lookers later struggle to describe what happened – saying it was like the gentle descent of a dove, full of beauty and gentleness and light. Many years later, the English writer Charles Williams describes the presence of the Holy Spirit as “The Descent of the Dove...”

So with Jesus Christ, for the first time, we see God the Holy Spirit being particularly at work in the baptism event...

There is no question that this event is a stunning turning-point in Jesus Christ's own life!... Jesus goes out into the wilderness for a long time, and has an intense spiritual struggle and time of temptation. (It sometimes happens that, after a profound work of God, people of faith struggle with an intense period of temptation...) Following this, Jesus Christ begins his amazing ministry of teaching, preaching and healing, which will lead finally to his dreadful death and his resurrected life...

According to scripture and the apostolic teaching of the Church, the turning-point for our Lord's ministry was when he was baptized... We note the presence of the Holy Spirit starting something new with Jesus' baptism... That's the story from our gospel reading today, from Mark 1...

Now, when the first-century Christian Church was developing, the followers of Jesus were still trying to come to terms with this wonderful man, Jesus, in whom the presence of God uniquely dwelt. It took a little time for Christians to work out practices, like how to celebrate the Lord's Supper, Holy Communion, the Mass; or, how to carry out the practice of Holy Baptism...

In our second reading this morning, there's the amusing little story from Acts 19. Paul comes to the town of Ephesus and finds a little Christian congregation. These Christians have been baptized the way John the Baptist baptized people, but no one ever mentioned to them of the presence of God the Holy Spirit!... It's a sweet, funny little story. St. Paul the Apostle, the great Christian leader, tries to figure out what to do... To be on the safe side, members of this little congregation participate in a full Christian baptism. God the Holy Spirit comes upon them, and they begin to praise God, and to exercise Christian ministry... The Church was coming to terms with the presence of the Holy Spirit in the rite of Holy Baptism...

Now, these events are wonderful living history stories. The Christian faith is not ancient myths or vague legends. They are rooted in what God has done in history – beginning with the descendants of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, and then for all people through the finished ministry of Jesus Christ...

Yet the content of scripture and early Christian tradition is not just about the *past*. All this is recorded for our instruction – so that you and I might learn how we can be faithful *today*. We become awakened to how God the Holy Spirit is at work in our lives, from our baptisms onward... Just as those lives were being changed so long ago, beginning with the Baptism of Jesus, so too lives continue to be changed today, as we live in response to all the blessings and mercy which God pours into our lives...

In the sacraments of the Church, it isn't so much what we are doing *for God*, but what God is doing *in us*, pouring his grace into our lives. The initiative is with God. We're learning how to respond...

Christian baptism, then, is a work of the initiative of God. The Holy Spirit is at work in our lives – even long before we might realize what God is up to. The Holy Spirit is helping us encounter and respond to Jesus Christ – our Saviour, Friend and King...

Now, in a great many churches, babies and young ones are often baptized. The parents and sponsors have faith, and are making commitments, that the young ones will be introduced to Christ... God is beginning his saving work, right from the beginning of life... Yet, there comes a time for all of us to choose for ourselves: Will I follow Jesus Christ for myself? Or, do I default to being self-centred, rather than Christ-centred?...

I encourage us all to go God's way; *Christ's* way. Thanks be to God for the gift of Jesus Christ. As he was baptized, so can we be. God the Holy Spirit worked without reservation in Jesus' life. We're not there yet, but we continue to be called to our true home... Stumbling and broken as we often are, let's dare to turn, and to believe...

Amen.