

Baptisms – Rev'd Catherine Eaton – Sunday 10th January 2010

Readings: Is 43.1-7, Ps 29, Acts 8.14-17, Lk 3.15-22

Today we celebrate the baptism of Jesus.

It's been a rapid journey over these weeks. On Christmas Day we celebrated Jesus' birth. 2 days later, we saw the child presented to the elders in the Temple by his family. Last week, we rejoiced with the Magi at the crib. We left Jesus last Sunday as a baby surrounded by family and lots of visitors.

Today, however, we're looking at Jesus, the man, about to launch into the most important years of his life. The gospel writers skipped the 30 years of his childhood and growing up. They say to us: we've told you about his birth so you know who he is, now let's get to the real story.

Today, Jesus comes to the Jordan to be baptised by John. As Jesus prays after his baptism, the Holy Spirit descends upon him and a voice from heaven says – you are my Son, the beloved.

Jesus' baptism was not just a ritual with water, not just a sign of repentance and renewal. His baptism was the launching pad for his public ministry. It was the sign that everything he had come to do was about to begin. It was a sign of anointing, a commissioning from God.

Jesus now begins to take upon himself the responsibility God has entrusted to him. Immediately, he is driven into the wilderness to be tested. Only then does he return to begin his work of proclaiming the Kingdom of God.

This story isn't just about Jesus' baptism. It's also about us. John the Baptist reminds us we too will be baptised, not just with water but with the inner fire of the Spirit, which commissions and empowers us for his work in the world.

Today's gospel reminds us that baptism is not just a nice thing we do for babies. Baptism is about new beginnings, commissionings, anointings, challenge and the energy of the Holy Spirit of God.

The second reading from Acts Ch8 echoes this. Baptism with water is not enough. Paul and John lay hands on the people of Samaria so they too can receive the inner grace and awakening of the Holy Spirit.

Baptism is an ongoing event. Every time God makes the hard call on us to step out into some new place, when he has work for us to do, we grow deeper into our baptism. Jesus' baptism was not just a passing ritual. It was a moment of awakening to the responsibilities before him, a beginning glimpse of what lay ahead. But he had been prepared – in those 30 years when the gospels are silent, we can be sure Jesus was learning, and discovering his relationship with God, his own inner resources, and all that he would need for the work before him.

Today's readings speak powerfully to us as parish in these times of change and uncertainty. The prophet Isaiah speaks words of hope and comfort, reassurance and promise to us as we chart our way through this apparent baptism of fire.

“But now, thus says the Lord who created you, he who formed you: Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are mine. When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you; when you walk through fire you shall not be burned, and the flame shall not consume you. For I am the Lord your God, the Holy One of Israel, your Saviour..... Because you are precious in my sight,

and honoured, and I love you....Do not fear, for I am with you: I will bring your offspring from the east and from the west I will gather you.....”

These words remind us that sometimes we have to go where we don't want to go, but it's the only way to get beyond where we are. But God remains with us, holds and protects us. Inscribe these words on your foreheads over these coming months, remind each other of them. There will be testing times – but God will be with you because you are precious in his sight and God loves you. This parish hasn't been through everything we've been through for the last 10 years for nothing.

Over the coming months, we'll remember what we've been and done together, we'll gather up the wisdom and the stories of those years. We'll mourn, but we will celebrate. We'll hold each other and encourage each other, and we'll begin the processes of change so that more and more you can take up the discerning and preparation needed for what happens next.

But let me back-track a bit.

Over these 4 months, you've done things I've not been a part of, and I have been through much you have not been part of. Even though we have still somehow been with each other through our prayers and love, these months have brought changes for me and for the parish.

The parish has changed – obviously Hans has gone, Kirsteen is no longer Lay Minister, Fr John is here. But there are more subtle differences which are normal and natural with the passing of months. This is not a time for just picking up and getting on with business as usual.

At present we grieve the loss of Hans, and we don't know what lies ahead. So we need to be sensitive with one another. We need to talk to each other and hold each other.

And things have changed, and have to change, for me. These have been wonderful years in the parish for me, but many of you knew I'd need to consider a change after 10 years. The last 4 years with Hans have been joyous, but as you know there were some hard years before. But we've made an amazing journey together. We've laid a foundation which is solid, even if the externals seem a bit fragile!

My decision to step down as Vicar is hard for me, but I know you understand. You know and I know it's right for the parish and for me. And I say again – it's not the community I want to leave, but the job is just too much now. We've grown together in love over these years and you have been with me like family.

But the cancer was God's signal that it's time for change. I know I will be well - as long as I change my life.

Hans was aware of my decision, and he also knew it was time for him to find his own niche – a new community in which to grow. I know you understand his decision too, though it doesn't make the loss any easier.

So, I've not come back to start where I left off. This is a new place we're in - a place of uncertainty, of familiar things looking different, of sadness, and maybe of fear. Some of you have been around the church long enough to weather the comings and goings of clergy. For others, these times of change may be more unsettling. Whatever is happening for you, reach out for each other and look after each other.

There are big changes ahead – this is not a time for racing ahead to clutch for securities, solutions and quick answers. This is a time for being together, encouraging each other, listening and praying

together, waiting and going steadily through the processes of change and discernment. These must not be rushed. Everything is open now, everything is possible. As someone said to me the other day, who knows what unexpected gifts God will drop into the spaces – like he did with Hans. Don't be too quick to fill up the spaces. Who knows what God has in store for this parish?

So it's not a time for a lot of activity, but for deepening relationships, consolidating the parish community, affirming its strengths, and most of all reinforcing our faith in God, our trust and love for one another, and our love for this parish - which God is entrusting to you for its future.

I don't know what the future is for me, but the future for the parish is up to you. You are the parish trustees. I'll go the way of all Vicars and become but a name and dates on a board! You will maintain the foundations we've built together, so that those who will come after can build upon them. You're the ones who will discern God's future here and pray in the new beginnings.

These 3 months will be important for us. Please try to be here as much as possible especially over Lent – Easter. I know many will have holidays planned, but if you haven't, please try to be here. Each of you is essential – even if you're only part-timers - to the ongoing life of the parish and the discernment of its future. The Bishop will come down in the near future to talk about processes and options.

This is baptism time for the parish - a baptism of fire and spirit for you all. Like Jesus, you have grown up now and God is saying to this parish – you are my beloved. God will pour his spirit upon you to equip you for the times ahead. Like Jesus, you'll begin to take up more of the responsibilities God has entrusted to you for the life of this parish – you may not be the ones to do the work, but you will hold and maintain the foundations of faith and love for those who will come after. Do this – hold the love, the unity, the faith, and all we've grown into together. Don't neglect these foundations, otherwise you make my 10 years, and Hans 4, in vain.

Jesus was tested immediately after his baptism. After Easter there may be a time of testing for you – when doubts and fears and bickerings may rise up, times when you want to run away, when it's all too hard. But stay with it like Jesus did – come through the testing time, because that will strengthen and equip you for the future.

This is indeed baptism of fire time for this parish, when you will draw deeply on all that has gone before, when the inner anointing of the Holy Spirit will strengthen and guide you into the future, and when you will begin to take up more of the responsibility that God has entrusted to you.

Hear again the words of Isaiah to you.....

“When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you; when you walk through fire you shall not be burned, and the flame shall not consume you. For I am the Lord your God you are precious in my sight Do not fear, for I am with you”.

Catherine Eaton