This week we keep the Feast of the Baptism of Christ. We always do this the week after Epiphany. There is this strange jumping around in the lectionary during Epiphany season between Gospel stories about Jesus birth and childhood – to experiences of his adult ministry. And while on many levels this feels odd, it is done to help us reaffirm our understanding, and help us to grow in the knowledge of who Jesus is, and that God has come to dwell amongst us.

Today as we mark the Baptism of Jesus, we also reaffirm our own baptism. Some of us may remember this, others may have been told about it. We may even recall baptisms we have been to.

I am often reminded of an outdoor baptism I went to in Australia once which was in the Macquarie river near Dubbo. The river was running at a good pace, so the water was clean and not stagnate, but it was still brown because of the colour of the mud below – not like the images and paintings you see of baptisms in the sea. To be baptised in a river is to be plunged into the darkness, and to come out of the river really was to be bought back into the light – in the sunshine and daylight to be exact. Not unlike the experience of Jesus, or those who were baptised alongside him.

The ancient societies for whom the creation stories were addressing had a view of water that came from this understanding. With none of the technology which we have at out fingertips today, for them - what was in the water, and under the water was unknown. It was a place of darkness, the place of monsters – a place of danger which was often equated with evil. We only need to look at the images of the floods to know that they were not wrong – water is powerful and can cause immense amounts of damage and disaster. But we who have had the luxury of seeing below the water, know that this is not the only truth – but for communities who saw water as dangerous, the darkness of the river or lake or sea was a confronting image.

While water could and can be dangerous, it is also a place of livelihood and for the community in which Jesus lived fishing was one of the key incomes. In fact, not long after his baptism Jesus walks along the shore and calls fishermen to be his disciples. Jesus and his disciples (as well as John’s disciples) understood that water was not only dangerous, but that it was also a source of life and livelihood. They depended on it for their survival – it was a place of life.

So water, as we see in our own baptisms is, a source of life and sustenance – but it can also bring about change – sometimes change that is good and sometimes which is unexpected.

When Luke writes to the early Christians about John the Baptist and Jesus’ Baptism- Luke pictures John the Baptist as an end-time prophet who announced that the apocalypse was about to occur that would end the present evil age and finally and fully bring about the realm of God, a new world in which all things would live forever in love, peace, justice, mutual support, freedom, and dignity[[1]](#footnote-1).

John called people to repent and to be baptized for the forgiveness of sins in order to be part of the coming new world. In Luke’s account baptism really was an image of being plunged into the darkness, the darkness of what needed to be left behind, of the evil that would be ended in the new kingdom that was coming – it was as much a symbolic plunging into the darkness as it was a ritual of cleansing – though of course that is present too. That plunging to let go of the old, and bring in the new – like the tick of the clock as it turns to 1201 on the 1st of January – a new era has come into being.

Our baptism is a letting go of the old ways – a new year’s resolution so to speak, that we seek to live by the values and teachings of God’s kingdom – the new world which Luke’s John dreams of. This is what John’s baptism was about – until Jesus.

When Jesus came to be baptized, he came to be publicly identified as the pivotal figure in the movement towards this vision that John is preaching. Moreover, his baptism signalled that God was now taking steps through the ministry of Jesus to signal that things are changing – and a new world is possible.

When Jesus is plunged into the murky waters it is not just leaving behind his old life, it is a signalling of all leaving behind a view of the world that does not fit with God’s view of the world. It is a claiming that in and through Jesus a new world might be achieved.

The challenge of course to each of us is that this new world is still struggling to come into being. The old world which was symbolically left in the water of Jesus baptism still exists – one in which greed, violence and power take precedence over love peace justice and equality!

But we should not feel despondent; for the renewing nature of baptism in ongoing and change happens at the moments we don’t expect it and in fact lives are transformed all the time.

If we need a sense of hope in the Baptism of Jesus, or in our own renewal of vows today then maybe we can be encouraged from the words of the prophet Isaiah which we heard earlier.

Isa 43:1-7 is a beautifully constructed unit of poetry that attempts throughout its seven verses to reconstruct the exiles living in Babylon understanding of their identity. It is part of a much larger poem on this theme of identity and how we understand who we are and what our purpose is – even at a time when things don’t seem to be going how we expected them, or are taking place in a community we hadn’t expected to be living in. “Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are mine” (43:1) You have been created by God, redeemed by God, named by God, and claimed by God, the prophet proclaims.

In these verses the prophet describes the lengths to which God will go to ensure the safety and wellbeing of the servant. Speaking in the first person as God - “Because you are precious in my sight, and honoured, and I love you.” To a community in exile, which viewed itself -- and was likely viewed by others in the same way -- as a “despised” these are very powerful words.

In the words of the baptism service we hear You are “marked as Christ’s own”. This is an identity claim: you are God’s beloved child, called to be a faithful servant in order to witness to God’s grace and mercy. Just like the Babylonians of old – just like John – Just like Jesus – all of who were plunged into the darkness and came out to know that God has claimed them.

As we continue in this new year, where the shadows of the old one sometimes overwhelm us, we are invited to remember the power of our baptism, that God has claimed us and call us forward.

Today is a new beginning if we allow it to be. If we all God to embrace us in the identity of our Baptism. We are invited to allow the waters of Baptism cleanse, refresh, renew and sustain us so that we may live each day in the hope and love which God has offered. Amen.

1. http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary\_id=2709 [↑](#footnote-ref-1)