

Today we keep the feast of the baptism of Christ, another moment which gives us a glimpse of the identity of Jesus, but it was also the day that Jesus begins to engage with his ministry in earnest.

Like our gospel reading from Matthew last week, in Mark's account there is no birth narrative. Mark starts right in with this revelation about Jesus at his baptism. For John and Mark, Jesus is the fulfilment of the "messenger" promised by the prophet Isaiah, a promise reiterated by John's own explanation of Jesus' baptism, that his baptism was with water, but "Jesus will baptize you with the Holy Spirit" (Mark 1:8).

When John baptized his followers it had two components -- repentance and forgiveness (Mark 1:4). As John explains Jesus role and ministry will bring a further component. Jesus will baptise not only with water, but with the Holy Spirit. Those elements are still true of baptism today. The baptismal liturgy marks the end of the old life ("Do you renounce ... ") and the beginning of a life lived in God's grace and forgiveness. Then Jesus adds a new component with the gift of the Holy Spirit, also part of our baptism service (" ... you have been sealed by the Holy Spirit ... ").

But what does our baptism, and the gift of holy water mean for us in a context when our Holy Water stoups are empty. Rowan Williams says, 'to be baptized is to recover the humanity that God first intended'¹ Baptism forms a part of our identity.

This was true with Jesus baptism too. At one level many argue that Jesus did not need forgiveness at baptism, but the waters of baptism confirm what is intended for Jesus - a voice speaks as the dove descends - '*You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased*'.

One of the gifts of baptism is that while it happens only once, it confirms our identity everyday – it reminds us that we belong to God, are made in God's image, and as such are valuable, as we are part of God's creation!

Today we also hear the beginning of one of the creation stories recorded in the bible, the opening verses to the book of Genesis. In this short passage we hear that in the beginning there was God, who created all the heavens and the earth, all that is possible and the potential for life. A better translation from the Hebrew would be the 'beginning of something'² – God is already at work and much potential is to come.

¹ Page 4, Rowan Williams – Being Christian . SPCK, 2014.

² <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revise-common-lectionary/baptism-of-our-lord-2/commentary-on-genesis-11-5-5>

In the first verses of the Bible we are introduced to a God who has already been at work, creating things even before the story starts. And God continues to act in such a way that eventually plants, animals, and humans will come into being. It was not a foregone conclusion that God would like what God created, but God declared it good, and eventually very good. The God we serve plans and prepares good things. And the God we serve delights in creation³. We are soon told that we are made in God's likeness. These verses, like the verses relating to Jesus baptism give us a hint to our identity – a sense of who we understand ourselves to be.

In a time when all is unsettled, when our routines are different, when things that are familiar are not allowed, when our access to the sacraments is limited, this image of baptism and creation draw us back to what is important, what is sustaining. Regardless of the situations we find ourselves in, or the challenges we face, God draws us back to who we are, people with gifts and potential who are made in the image of God.

In both passages today it is the spirit of God which brings transformation – the spirit moves over the waters of the earth, and the spirit descends from the heavens confirming Jesus identity. But more than this, in the baptism of Jesus the Holy Spirit also descends into our lives, as it did at the creation of the world⁴.

In John's baptism, transformation came in the act of repentance; but in the baptism of Jesus transformation takes place through the working of the spirit. It is the spirit which sustains us, awakens us, nurtures us and transforms us.

There is something else happening here too. While these stories explore themes of identity – they are not about individuality. While we are created to make the most of the gifts and skills we have been given, to explore as best we can the potential that God has made – this possibility is for the good of all creation.

This week, like many others, our news have been full of disturbing images of people claiming that they have the one and only truth. With the rise in distribution of ideas through social media, rather than increase our awareness of others and compassion for humanity – it seems at times to narrow our perspective, and lessen our individual human ability to see that identity should not separate us from each other, but rather inspire our interconnectedness with the whole of creation.

³ <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revise-common-lectionary/baptism-of-our-lord-2/commentary-on-genesis-11-5-5>

⁴ <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revise-common-lectionary/baptism-of-our-lord-2/49243>

The pandemic challenges our sense of individuality possibly more than any other issue of our time. Our behaviour has potential to have a direct impact on our community – as such 1 in 30 Londoners are now infected with Covid-19. It is a sobering image. And yet, our desire to be a community, to care for one another now means many of us are isolated, alone and have had no physical touch for nearly 9 months. How do we hold all of this, with the image of the Holy Spirit descending and transforming all of creation?

When John baptises Jesus it marks that moment when the waters of baptism, which quench our thirst and refresh us, become not just signs of new life – but a sign of the abundance of God’s love, and the desire for us to fully engage with both our humanity and God’s divinity. The challenges of these days invite us to be united in the spirit of God, when we cannot physically meet. To see our potential in our ability to help each other through prayer and acts of kindness.

We become the people God created us to be, by seeing each other as God sees us, and allowing ourselves to see what is good. Amen.