

St Bartholomew's Burnley Sunday 11th January 2026

The Baptism of our Lord

One of the privileges and joys for any clergyperson is the request to baptize an infant, child, teenager or adult. While I do not recall my own baptism a few months after my birth, at St Stephen's Richmond, it was without doubt the beginning of my Christian journey whether I was aware of it or not. The same may be for many of you gathered here this morning. Until more recent times the majority of parents whether religious or not brought their children to the Church to be baptized, especially if they were Church of England or Roman Catholic. For some no doubt this was simply because it was the custom or family tradition, others because for them Baptism embraced identity, name, faith and community. Others brought their child as a sign of thankfulness and joy. I know today that many grandparents are saddened, disappointed and even distressed in some circles that their own children have now rejected any form of Christian faith, have not been married in or by the Church or bring their children for baptism. In some ways this is both positive and negative. Negative in the sense of children not hearing about God and positive that parents are not making promises they cannot or do not intend to keep. This is made worse now by the lack of religious education, not religious instruction in many of our schools.

I hear on occasions that some clergy will not baptize a child of parents who are not themselves baptized or do not attend church. I am not one of

those. Baptism is a gift of God and the child although yes part of a family is still a child in his or her own right. Who am I to deny God's grace?

Baptism was not new when John came baptizing. If we think for a moment about water and its life-giving essence it is predictable that water in some way would be incorporated into the rich symbolism of the Church. On the feast of the Epiphany observed by the Orthodox Churches they have the Annual Blessings of the water and the accompanying race to retrieve a wooden cross from the waters of Port Philip Bay. The one who collects the cross goes around his neighborhood blessing the houses.

In Judaism adult converts to the faith were baptized into the river Jordan. Here they recalled in ritual the experiences of their ancestors who crossed through the Red sea to freedom.

John's baptism was a call to wake up to his own people and to repent because the Kingdom of God was at hand. John described himself as one crying in the wilderness claiming that the messiah was close by and at hand.

It was in this setting and context that Jesus; a faithful Jew came to be baptized by John.

In the Church's calendar the Christmas cycle is now officially ended, and today's readings commemorate and enrich the baptism of our Lord in the river Jordan.

I don't know about you, but the past few weeks have flown by as they do every year at this time. Holidays slip by then the cricket, tennis and back to

work. We move very quickly from celebrating the birth of Christ then Epiphany and now the baptism of Jesus. The hurried pace of the season is also seen in Matthew's Gospel. In less than three chapters he has shared the birth narrative, the visit of the three magi, the flight of the Holy family from Herod and then they return home.

Those of us who have visited Israel and the river Jordan are surprised that at the place where the Gospel story for today took place it is no more than a bush creek as we would describe it in Australia with little water and in many places stagnant. When I visited the river Jordan some 25 years ago it seemed to me a muddy creek and I gather today it is not much better. It is here however that after 30 years of near obscurity the ministry of Jesus begins. For the next three years he will travel around the countryside teaching, healing, challenging the political and religious leaders of the day. He will side with the outcast and dissidents and the crowds will follow him. As we know from the Gospels the authorities were beside themselves about his ability to draw the crowds and so they continually plotted to trick and bring him down.

Today's Gospel from Matthew is a call to ministry, a call to love and service.

Firstly, I suggest it is the calling of a new age. the beginning of a new stage of history. The opening of the heavens and the naming of Jesus as the beloved is the sign of new beginnings.

Strikingly after his baptism Jesus journeys into the wilderness where his vocation is tested, and his ministry fully begins. Jesus rejects worldly wealth, status and power. His values were counterculture to those who held power and aligned more with the outsider and excluded. We see the same in many places in today's world. The Gospel stands counterculture to the dismay of those who he challenges and even some who claim to be followers.

Secondly when Jesus came out of the waters of baptism, he was given an identity, just like we are at our baptism-he was named "beloved of God," just like we are. He had to discover how he was to live his life just as we are. God's grace is bestowed upon him and the same with us. He had lots of options as we do but chose the way of the servant, weak, gentle and patient reflected and recorded in the words of the prophet Isaiah. Here we witness the beginnings of the new age or turning point in history. John gives witness to this moment in history.

At the beginning of a new year all this talk of baptism and confidence for the future is a cause for us all to reflect upon. Remember the promises we each made at our baptism and at each Easter we renew? Do we turn to Christ? What does this mean for how we live our lives? Do we repent of our sins? Are we truly sorry for the things that we have done as well as that we have omitted to do? Sadly, the word sorry has become trivialized by people in all walks of life when they have been caught out or failure to live up to the standards they demand of others. To be truly sorry is to own

the mistakes of the past and commit oneself not to repeat them and to embrace a renewed way of being, of expressing and sharing our common humanity. It means making amends. Repentance embraces justice for those who have been affected by our actions or failure to act.

Do we reject selfish living? I am pretty sure this is a big failure of mine at times. A difficult task in our consumer orientated world.

As well as these being questions of faith and discipleship, they are also lifestyle questions. Those who gathered around Jesus on the day of his baptism were also grappling with such questions.

Each year many of us try to make New Year resolutions. Rather than the hackney ones about not eating as much, clearing the debts of the past we could use the questions asked at our baptism as a more reliable and reflective guide to evaluate the past year and to prepare for the future, building on the optimism of the Prophet Isaiah and then step out with confidence and good will. In this way we can recommit and reaffirm our baptismal vows.

As one commentator on the gospel says, "The baptized life is not a career that we can pursue part-time, or one day retire from. It is a vocation meant to be lived out with every fiber of our being. That's why it's so important that we renew our baptismal vows over and over again and share in the feast of Christ's body and blood over and over again and read and study Scripture over and over again—because we human beings are forgetful people!"

An essential part of the Christian vocation is reminding one another who and whose we are. We do that by extending and receiving grace and mercy, by opening ourselves up to vulnerability, and ultimately by telling the story of the God we meet in Jesus—a story that continues unto the fullness of time.”

Now there is something for us to think about this way as we record our own baptism and discipleship.

Amen