

## **St Bartholomew's Burnley, Sunday 15th February 2026**

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.

On a trip nearly 20 years ago through Turkey and Greece with a small group of like - minded people we stopped for a day at Philippi where Lydia was the first women baptized in Europe. I had the privilege on this day of baptising one of the senior women who were journeying with us on the trip who told me at the time she was not a card carrying Christian but that throughout the trip the places we visited and the people she had met and engaged with on her travels a new perspective on Christian faith and how her fellow travellers welcomed her without judgement . Next week I will have the privilege of baptising a local woman, unchurched who feels the call to be baptized.

This week, our Gospel reading is taken from the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew's Gospel where Jesus is speaking to disciples about how to live from the heart. He is not casting aside the Law of Moses but reinterpreting it by placing emphasis on values such as justice, mercy and faith. In other words, it is as if he is moving from outward observance to inward transformation. From Temple ritual to service in the community.

Baptism was not new when John, known as John the Baptist came baptizing calling his followers to set aside their current way of living and follow him and his call for justice and peace. If we think for a moment about water and its life-giving essence it is predicable 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.

Those of us who have visited Israel and the river Jordan are surprised that at the place where John and Jesus were baptized took place is no more than a bush creek as we would describe it 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 Jesus 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.

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. Today's Gospel reading provides a framework for living. It is a manifesto .

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. Our newly baptised Persephone will also be on this journey\_

Faith is not about anxious rule-keeping. It is about allowing God to reshape us from the inside out. The commandments point the way; grace gives us the strength.