

Service for Caversham Park Church, Sunday 10 January 2021 (1st in Epiphany)

INTRODUCTION

Good morning, and welcome to this service for Caversham Park Church for the 10th of January, the 1st Sunday in Epiphany.

We decided last Sunday to suspend our services in person at Caversham Park School, and since then the national lockdown has made it all the more important that we do not put ourselves or anyone else at risk by leaving home when it is not strictly necessary to do so. So today's service is recorded once again.

Immediately after this service at 12 noon, members of the Church are asked to stay online, because we will have an Extraordinary General Meeting of Caversham Park Church. That meeting has two purposes. One is to conduct the essential business of the Annual General Meeting that we did not hold in 2020, and the other is to consider an offer from the United Reformed Church about how we might work with them in future. We'll tell you more about that when the meeting begins at noon.

Meanwhile, our service today celebrates the baptism of Christ. Our first hymn is ...

HYMN Hail to the Lord's anointed

PRAISE The Benedictus

A traditional hymn of praise at Morning Prayer is the Benedictus, the words that John the Baptist's father Zacharias spoke as he welcomed his new-born son. We will be thinking today about the baptism of Jesus, so it is particularly appropriate today. Please speak the words with me.

THE BENEDICTUS (Luke 1.68-79)

**You have raised up for us a mighty Saviour,
born of the house of your servant David.**

**1 Blessed be the Lord the God of Israel,
who has come to his people and set them free.**

**2 He has raised up for us a mighty Saviour,
born of the house of his servant David.**

**3 Through his holy prophets God promised of old
to save us from our enemies,**

from the hands of all that hate us,

**4 To show mercy to our ancestors,
and to remember his holy covenant.**

**5 This was the oath God swore to our father Abraham:
to set us free from the hands of our enemies,**

**6 Free to worship him without fear,
holy and righteous in his sight all the days of our life.**

**7 And you, child, shall be called the prophet of the Most High,
for you will go before the Lord to prepare his way,**

**8 To give his people knowledge of salvation
by the forgiveness of all their sins.**

**9 In the tender compassion of our God
the dawn from on high shall break upon us,**

10 To shine on those who dwell in darkness and the shadow of death,

**and to guide our feet into the way of peace.
Glory to the Father and to the Son
and to the Holy Spirit;
as it was in the beginning, is now,
and shall be for ever. Amen.
You have raised up for us a mighty Saviour,
born of the house of your servant David.**

CONFESSION

The lockdown puts us all under a lot of strain, and one of the big problems is communicating with other people. It's almost impossible to meet people face to face if we don't live with them, and that limits us to other means of communication – letters or emails, phone calls or Zoom meetings. We can't easily convey our meaning through facial expressions or gestures, and misunderstandings are very likely. Even if we have the privilege of living with people we love, we can still irritate one another. All this can lead to tensions and disputes. We need God's help to repair the damage, and help us take the difficult steps of admitting we may have got it wrong, and forgiving others who may have hurt us.

So let us confess our sins to God and ask him to forgive us:

Lord God, we confess that we have sinned against you and against other people. We have not been careful about what we say or write, and we have not thought enough about what others are trying to say to us. We have allowed misunderstandings to lead to anger and separation. We have not remembered your command to love you and love our neighbour.

Lord, mercifully forgive us all our sins, and inspire us to forgive others. Lead us to new life in which we build bridges to those from whom we have separated ourselves. Help us to be more careful in the future. We ask it for the sake of your Son, Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.

Jesus says, to me and to you: Your sins are forgiven.

Amen. Thanks be to God.

HYMN Just as I am, without one plea

READING – Acts 19:1-7 – Michael Andrews

Act 19:1-7

(1) While Apollos was in Corinth, Paul passed through the interior regions and came to Ephesus, where he found some disciples.

(2) He said to them, "Did you receive the Holy Spirit when you became believers?" They replied, "No, we have not even heard that there is a Holy Spirit."

(3) Then he said, "Into what then were you baptized?" They answered, "Into John's baptism."

(4) Paul said, "John baptized with the baptism of repentance, telling the people to believe in the one who was to come after him, that is, in Jesus."

(5) On hearing this, they were baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus.

(6) When Paul had laid his hands on them, the Holy Spirit came upon

them, and they spoke in tongues and prophesied—
(7) altogether there were about twelve of them.

READING – Mark 1:4-11 – Paula Andrews

Mar 1:4-11

(4) John the baptizer appeared in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.

(5) And people from the whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem were going out to him, and were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins.

(6) Now John was clothed with camel's hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey.

(7) He proclaimed, "The one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to stoop down and untie the thong of his sandals.

(8) I have baptized you with water; but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit."

(9) In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan.

(10) And just as he was coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on him.

(11) And a voice came from heaven, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased."

HYMN When Jesus came to Jordan

SERMON

May the words of my mouth and the thoughts of all our hearts be always acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our Rock and our Redeemer. Amen.

It can be difficult, in this time after Christmas, to relate the order of events in the life of Jesus to the order in which we remember them.

The story begins with the Annunciation, which is nine months before Christmas, and therefore usually falls within Lent.

We have just celebrated Christmas, beginning with the birth of Jesus, and his circumcision on the eighth day remembered on the 1st of January. Nobody really knows on what day Jesus was born, but the Church began quite early to celebrate it around the same time as pagan festivals that fell in midwinter.

We don't know when Jesus would have been presented in the temple. The traditional celebration, Candlemas, falls on the second of February, which is forty days after Christmas and therefore about the right date in relation to the birth of Jesus.

The next event was the visit of the Wise Men, the Epiphany, remembered on the 6th of January. There is no suggestion in Matthew's Gospel that they arrived immediately after Jesus was born. They may well have thought that the star they had seen had appeared simultaneously with the birth, and only then begun the long journey from wherever they were. They went to Jerusalem first, before finding that Bethlehem should be their destination. We celebrate their visit twelve days after Christmas, but it could well have been twelve months or more. Herod killed the children under two years old in the hope of getting rid of his feared rival, and the commemoration of that event is a lesser festival on the 28th of December.

Although it doesn't have a date of its own in the calendar, a significant event was when Jesus went to Jerusalem with his family, when he was twelve, and stayed behind to study with the scholars and scribes. When Mary and Joseph realised he had not come back with them, they went and found him, and he said, "Did you not know that I must be in my Father's house?" The reading about this is used every three years on the Sunday after Christmas.

We know nothing about Jesus in his teenage years or early adulthood. The next thing we hear of, and the first story in Mark's gospel, was his baptism, as recorded in today's reading. Luke tells us that Jesus was about thirty years old when that happened. It is remembered on the first Sunday after Epiphany.

All three synoptic Gospels, Matthew, Mark and Luke, record the baptism, and they all say that Jesus immediately went into the wilderness for forty days – an event we remember during Lent, particularly on Ash Wednesday.

So the events are remembered in an order that makes little sense, until you realise that the connections are thematic rather than chronological. For example, we remember the baptism of Christ in this week after Epiphany because, like the visit of the Magi, it is a revelation of Christ to the world. It is one of the events when the identity of Jesus as the Son of God becomes apparent.

The idea of baptism is familiar to us as the way in which we welcome new Christians into the family of the Church. But before Jesus was baptised, there was no such thing as the Church, except in the mind of God, and Jesus hardly needed to be welcomed into it. After all, the Church is his body.

We also think of baptism as washing away our sins so that we can make a clean start. That idea is much more relevant to today's commemoration. It was familiar to people, a way of marking a decision or a conversion to a new and better relationship with God. John was proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins, and as Mark and the other Gospels describe it, he was being very successful. People were flocking to him. Matthew's Gospel tells us that John did not welcome everyone who came. He told the Pharisees and Sadducees that they were a brood of vipers, and asked them, "Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come?" But Luke's version has John addressing these words to the whole crowd, because everyone is a sinner and needs to repent and change, and the account goes on to tell us that John told them things that we would expect to hear from Jesus. He told them to share their coats and food with those in need, to stop cheating people and extorting money from them.

That all sounds great, but how does it apply to Jesus? We believe in him as one who was without sin, who had no need of cleansing or repentance. Matthew's Gospel recognises the problem:

Mat 3:14-15

(14) John would have prevented him, saying, "I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?"

(15) But Jesus answered him, "Let it be so now; for it is proper for us in this way to fulfill all righteousness." Then he consented.

I think the explanation is something like this. Although we believe Jesus to be the Son of God in a unique relationship with his Father, Jesus did not himself claim to be sinless – that is something that later Christians have recognised about him. At this stage in his life, as someone who as far as we know was unknown to the crowd, he could hardly have made such claims without attracting enmity and ridicule and probably death. But still more fundamental is the whole idea of the Incarnation, of God coming among us as Jesus Christ. To come among us fully, Jesus had to identify himself with us fully, he had to experience what we do and he had to share our life completely. So even if he did not need cleansing or forgiveness, he needed baptism because we all need it, and he is one of us. As Paul puts it:

Php 2:5-8

(5) Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus,

(6) who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited,

(7) but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form,

(8) he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death—even death on a cross.

So far, hardly anything I have said comes directly from the reading from Mark's Gospel. That's because Mark says very little about the baptism, there is much less detail than in the other Gospels. Let me read Mark's version to you again:

Mar 1:9-11

(9) In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan.

(10) And just as he was coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on him.

(11) And a voice came from heaven, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased."

For Mark, the baptism needs no explanation and raises no questions. What is important is this encounter between Jesus and the Holy Spirit. Until this point in his conscious life, nothing particularly unusual has happened to Jesus. The only thing recorded is his visit to the temple, his engagement with academic study in a way that few twelve-year-olds would attempt, and his assumption that he should be "in his Father's house".

But now he has this tremendous experience which shows him, and John, and the onlookers, and us who he truly is. He sees the heavens torn apart; the Spirit comes on him like a dove; and the voice from heaven affirms him and praises him.

One of the things that is fascinating to speculate on, and about which we know virtually nothing, is what was going on in Jesus' mind at different stages of his life. Did he already know, as a baby in the cradle, who he was? Or did he come to realise it gradually? Or was it a sudden experience that forced him to see his life and his personality and his identity and his mission in a totally new life?

My guess is that it was a gradual process. When he referred to his Father's house, he may not have seen his relationship to God as any different from the relationship that other people could have and can have. If that is what he thought then, he may well have been largely right. If we look at the Bible carefully, we will come to realise that our destiny is, or at least can be, to become children of God.

Joh 1:12-13

(12) But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God,

(13) who were born, not of blood or of the will of the flesh or of the will of man, but of God.

So as a boy, Jesus may have seen himself as no different from anyone else. We know nothing at all about the subsequent eighteen years or so. All we can guess is from John's recognition that it would be better for Jesus to baptise him than the other way round. John was of course a relative, and had probably watched Jesus throughout his life, so he knew what he was talking about. He must have seen that Jesus was an unusually holy person.

But when Jesus was baptised, he had this tremendous and overwhelming experience, of direct contact with God and direct knowledge of God's love for him and approval of his ministry. No wonder then that he needed to take some time out to process this experience, to go out into the desert and think through who he was, and what he was called to do.

I believe, therefore, that the baptism of Jesus marks a critical turning point in his life. Until then, he may have suspected that he had a special role or calling of some sort. But this experience confirmed those ideas in the most unmistakeable way.

So what has all this got to do with us?

First, it underlines for us the humanity of Christ, the man who shared our life and who shared our experience of baptism and cleansing.

Second, it underlines the divinity of Christ, the Son of God in whom his Father was well pleased.

And finally, it reminds us once again of who we are and what we can be, that is, children of God who receive his love just as Jesus did, and are called to serve him just as Jesus did.

Let us today recall our own baptism, and renew our willingness to live the Christian life to which it commits us.

Amen.

RENEWAL OF BAPTISM PROMISES

Last week in our service, we renewed our Covenant with God. But I still think it is appropriate for us on this occasion to renew the promises that we made when we ourselves were baptised. So please look at the words on the screen, and if you feel able, say them with me.

In baptism, God calls us out of darkness into his marvellous light.
To follow Christ means dying to sin and rising to new life with him.
Therefore I ask:

Do you reject the devil and all rebellion against God?

I reject them.

Do you renounce the deceit and corruption of evil?

I renounce them.

Do you repent of the sins that separate us from God and neighbour?

I repent of them.

Do you turn to Christ as Saviour?

I turn to Christ.

Do you submit to Christ as Lord?

I submit to Christ.

Do you come to Christ, the way, the truth and the life?

I come to Christ.

Brothers and sisters, I ask you to profess the faith of the Church.

Do you believe and trust in God the Father?

**All I believe in God, the Father almighty,
creator of heaven and earth.**

Do you believe and trust in his Son Jesus Christ?

**All I believe in Jesus Christ, his only Son, our Lord,
who was conceived by the Holy Spirit,
born of the Virgin Mary,
suffered under Pontius Pilate,
was crucified, died, and was buried;
he descended to the dead.**

**On the third day he rose again;
he ascended into heaven,
he is seated at the right hand of the Father,
and he will come to judge the living and the dead.**

Do you believe and trust in the Holy Spirit?

**All I believe in the Holy Spirit,
the holy catholic Church,
the communion of saints,
the forgiveness of sins,
the resurrection of the body,
and the life everlasting.**

Amen.

HYMN O let the Son of God enfold you

INTERCESSIONS

Lord God our Father, we pray for your whole Church, and particularly for the Church in Caversham Park. Give us wisdom to discern your will for us, and the power and commitment to put your will into effect. Guide us in our special meeting today to make the right choices and to find the best way of working with the United Reformed Church.

Lord, in your mercy, **hear our prayer.**

We pray that your kingdom of justice and peace may be established in all the world. We give thanks for the vaccines that are now becoming available. We ask for wisdom for all in authority, to make the right decisions about how our activities should be limited in order to bring the pandemic under control, and about how to obtain and distribute the vaccines most effectively. Help us all, and especially any who have doubts or fears, to follow the rules laid down for us carefully, and to seek vaccination as soon as it is available to us. We pray particularly for all those who are in difficulties or danger as a result of the pandemic.

We pray today for the United States of America, and we ask that the violence may come to an end and that President-Elect Joe Biden may enjoy a peaceful transition and a successful time in office.

We pray for all who suffer from hunger, poverty, oppression and violence; lead us to do all that we can to help them. We pray for the protection of the created environment and for appropriate action to limit climate change.

Lord, in your mercy, **hear our prayer.**

We pray for our community and our neighbours, thinking particularly of the family and friends of Olly Stephens, the staff and pupils of Highdown School and the people at St Barnabas and throughout Emmer Green. We pray also for those who killed him, asking that they may receive justice, and may be brought to repentance and helped to change and begin a better life.

We remember Margaret, Janikka and all whose birthdays fall at this time.

Lord, in your mercy, **hear our prayer.**

We bring to you all those who suffer in body, mind or spirit, and especially those who are suffering from COVID-19 or its effects, and those whose treatment for other conditions may be affected.

Lord, in your mercy, **hear our prayer.**

We remember before you all those who have died, most of all those who were dear to us. According to your promises, grant us with them a share in your eternal kingdom.

Lord, in your mercy, **hear our prayer.**

Merciful Father, **accept these prayers for the sake of your Son, Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.**

COLLECT

Eternal Father,
who at the baptism of Jesus
revealed him to be your Son,
anointing him with the Holy Spirit:
grant to us, who are born again by water and the Spirit,
that we may be faithful to our calling as your adopted children;
through Jesus Christ your Son our Lord,
who is alive and reigns with you,
in the unity of the Holy Spirit,
one God, now and for ever.

Amen.

LORD'S PRAYER

HYMN Crown him with many crowns

BLESSING

May God, who in Christ gives us a spring of water
welling up to eternal life,
perfect in us the image of his glory;
and may the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit
be with us evermore.

Amen.

And straight on to EGM