

The Baptism of Christ – Luke 3:15-17,21-22

According to family tradition my grandfather was born in Somerset, the son of a coal miner. Except that he wasn't. That was his father. My grandfather was born in Cardiff, the son of a blacksmith. Somewhere along the line we lost a generation. Grandfather himself trained as an industrial chemist. But actually, the most interesting thing about him is that for several years he led the communal singing at the end of the Pearl Insurance Agents' conference at Blackpool.

The thought of that communal singing always makes me smile, how uneasily would it sit with modern power point and video conference techniques? But it does highlight two things. Firstly, that what interests the future generations (in this case me) is probably not what his parents would wish him to be remembered for. And secondly that the world moves on, times have changed. As far as I know only the Labour party still end their conference with a song.

We see the baptism of Christ as a major event in his life. It marks the end of his obscurity in Nazareth and the beginning of his teaching. It is a practise that we copy in our own ceremonies of initiation into the church community, and it has a whole Sunday in the church calendar to itself! But Luke has compressed his account into two verses. Perhaps he had no idea what would interest future generations.

John the Baptist had become a recognised figure, extreme in his appearance, preaching the message that change was on the way.

'Was he perhaps the Messiah himself?'. You can almost hear a deep chuckle at the idea. 'Not me', he says, 'I'm not your man. But someone is coming who will really shake things up.' And because he spoke in a way that they understood and promised that the Messiah was coming, people didn't just listen, they heard the good news and sought baptism.

In my mind there was a queue of people snaking up the river bank waiting their turn. Pretty much like the queues at the covid vaccination centres. Within those queues there would be people talking, a mixture of 'what will the Messiah be like when he does come', and 'my neighbour came last week told me I just had to see for myself'. Some people busy with their own thoughts, but there could be some hoping for conversation and not knowing how to start one. Feeling isolated within a crowd.

So Jesus joins the queue, and when his time comes he gets into the river and John baptises him. Only then does something extraordinary happen. The bystanders see a dove come out of the sky and a voice, 'You are my beloved Son, in you I am well pleased'. We are indebted to Matthew for a little more information about the incident. John had remonstrated with Jesus. 'It should be you baptising me, not this way round'. But Jesus insists and John baptises him.

We can speculate as to why what to us seems a major event in the life of Christ can be recorded so minimally. Possibly those early followers did not see baptism as of important although that idea is contradicted by the number of references in the Acts of the Apostles – this morning's new testament reading tells of Peter and

John going to Samaria where there was a community that had been baptised but had not yet received the Holy Spirit. Could it be that those two verses of Luke actually tell us everything we need to know?

Present in the story of the baptism of Christ were all the parts of the trinity. God the Father, in heaven, but making a rare direct impact on earth. Neither gospel is clear as to whether everyone heard his voice, but it feels so much like a public declaration that surely at least those people standing near would have heard it. God the Son, in the river being baptised by a recognised preacher. The Holy Spirit coming in the form of a dove, and linked with the voice from heaven, so emphatically sent from God.

This week I have been thinking about what God said. 'My Son, in whom I am well pleased'. Ancestry was very important to the Jews, underlined by Luke immediately going on to link Jesus' line of descent through Joseph and back to Adam. (And Luke does not lose a generation) For God to claim fatherhood would be seen as significant. But it is the concept of being pleased that has fascinated me. I could argue that apart from that incident in the temple when he was about twelve Jesus has done nothing of significance up to this point. What was God pleased with?

Because of the temple incident and that comment by Jesus when scolded by his mother for not being where he should be, 'I was in my Father's house', we know that Jesus was aware that he was different. But up to the point of his baptism the only other person recorded as being aware of the difference is his mother. Jesus had appeared to be just the carpenter son of a carpenter from

Nazareth. Perhaps God is pleased that he had not been tempted to show his divinity until the proper time. More likely I have got it wrong. I am expecting pride to relate to a specific act or achievement when God's pride is in his being. Think of the number of times in the creation story that God sees that it is good. He only has to look.

That happens in our lives too. Sometimes we are so busy looking for big events and achievements, pursuing our own agendas, interacting with our own friends that we become oblivious to what is happening around us. We fail to spot those people in the queue wanting to talk but not knowing how to begin. I heard on the radio a story of Bob. Bob who in the midst of a big family new years party realised that his next door neighbour, a single mother, was home with only a sleeping child for company. So, he left his party and fetched his neighbour, settling the child wrapped in a blanket on the sofa with his own children, and had them join the celebration. Twenty years later the mother told us it was the best new year she had ever had.

Deep down most of us would like to feel that others are 'well pleased' with us. But that doesn't have to be derived from headline grabbing actions or expansive gestures. For our actions to be valued they don't need to be vaunted. Luke told us all we need to know about Christ's baptism in two small verses. 2000 years later the description of Bob's kindness didn't take many more words.

So what would it take for God to be well pleased with us? To be the instigators of grand initiatives bound up in hype and self-publicity ?

Or to be like Bob noticing someone who might like to be included but will need a little encouragement, and doing the encouraging.