

The Baptism of Christ

Forty years ago a history teacher was having a tough time with a class of twelve year olds. Later, this history teacher would work in universities and make a name for himself. That was success in store, in that classroom, he really had not hit his stride. He was telling his class about the Anglo Saxon Witan. That was a mistake. If you are not sure what the Witan is you are in good company. Historians don't know either, they might tell you that it was a royal council, but they would avoid your eye and shuffle their notes and mutter words like *disputed* and *possibly*. They would point out that it probably wasn't called the *Witan* at all and then remember they had an urgent appointment at the Dog and Duck. The lesson on the Witan was doomed. As the despair mounted a hand went up, 'Please Sir, did the Anglo-Saxons wear gloves?' The teacher huffed and puffed a bit and thought they probably did not wear gloves. He set an essay on the Anglo-Saxon Witan and made his escape. When the essays came back, virtually no one understood what the Witan was, but nearly every essay began 'The Anglo-Saxons were people who did not wear gloves'.

You can forget all about the Witan, there will be no questions about the Witan later. What I need you to know is that history is messy. We pretend it is not, but all too often we ask the wrong question, or get stuck on with a detail. There is a lot of history around at the moment and it is great fun, but it is a bit misleading. I caught a repeat of David Starkey the other day. He was standing in a field where a bloody and chaotic battle had been fought. He wore a silk tie and an immaculate waistcoat. He made it tidy. History is not tidy. History is confusing and takes turns in odd directions. History is you and me and a lot more people like us wondering what the plan is. It is Brexit and Donald Trump, and Aleppo. It is people who make choices and commitments and then hope for the best. History does not have a plan; it is not going anywhere. For every person who wants to tell you about the Witan there is another telling you that it was not actually called the Witan, and someone else who wants to know if Anglo-Saxons wore gloves.

Now that's a long introduction to a sermon, but if we don't get the point about history we will never understand the business of the baptism of Christ. Our gospel reading this morning told us that,

This is the one of whom the prophet Isaiah spoke (Matthew 3:3)

Matthew locates this story in a history of prophecy. Luke starts somewhere else.

In the fifteenth year of the reign of Emperor Tiberius, when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea, (Luke 3:1)

It was history. History really matters in Luke's gospel. We heard Chapter Three. Go back to Chapter One and you will find,

In the days of King Herod of Judea, there was a priest named Zechariah (Luke 1:5)

Or try Chapter Two,

In those days a decree went out from Emperor Augustus that all the world should be registered Luke 2:1

More history. Luke writes history, more than any other gospel, Luke sets Christ in the great sweep of emperors and governors and kings.

Why does Luke do that, why does Matthew want to set the Baptism in the history of prophecy? Well, Luke does it partly just to remind us that this really is *history*. The life of Christ is not *a once upon a time* sort of story. It is not make believe. The ministry of John the Baptist, that we heard about this morning, is written up by the greatest of the Jewish historians, Josephus. So, do not let people tell you that Christianity is not true. It is true. We can argue about what it means, but it is certainly true.

But that is only part of what is going on here. Matthew is interested in the way that prophecy works itself out in the oddest ways. Luke knows that history is messy. Both of them know that if we look for progress, or want measures of success, scripture will disappoint. Luke has really understood the point about history not going anywhere. He wants to show us just how messy history is. He tells us that this happened in the days of King Herod. And he does that not because he wants to give us Herod's dates (37 and 4 BCE). He does that so we will think about Herod. Herod was not a Jew, Herod did not look God for God's kingdom; Herod thought instead about the Emperor and Rome and power. That is what Luke wants us to spot, that history is going in the wrong direction when Jesus is born. Jesus the King was born when a false king was on the throne. Luke makes the same point all over again, when he tells us about the Emperor Augustus. He expects us to know that Augustus was the emperor who kept talking about peace. They even called it the *pax augusta*. And of course it was nothing of the sort, it was the peace you get by killing all your enemies. When Luke tells us the angels sang about peace on earth we are supposed to hear the irony. Augustus was not the prince of peace, history was wrong.

This is the key idea in Luke. This gospel is a new kind of history. Luke gives us all those names and governors, and *the fifteenth year of the reign of Emperor Tiberius* (Luke 3:1) precisely to tell us that if you rely on history you will end badly. History was going nowhere when Jesus was born. History, destiny, ambition; it was all a blind alley. Luke insists that we notice that.

Luke delivers his history lesson in a very particular way. Listen again to how we began this morning

In the fifteenth year of the reign of Emperor Tiberius, when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea

Now that sounds remarkably like the *beginning* of a story. I have got history books that begin 'On 30th January 1649...'. But this is not the beginning of the gospel, this is chapter three. It is quite deliberate. When Luke begins chapter three and introduces John the Baptist he wants us to know we have turned a page; something new and different has been let loose. It really is a new beginning. History has been plunging us into muddle and into despair, prophets have prophesied, martyrs have died, kings have dipped their hands in blood and it has all been going badly. Then suddenly, there is a voice, in the wildernesses of all places, and something begins.

John the Baptist strides out of nowhere to tell the Jews they are looking in the wrong place for the wrong thing. He wants to baptize them when they are already believers. He wants

them to turn round and repent when they think they had all that sorted. If I told Glynn, and Roger, and Ed that evensong tonight would begin with a dip in the fountains outside city hall, that there would be no cassocks, no bowing, no Stanford in C, that Canon Robert would be carry the virge and that we would be setting off for Oswaldtwistle we would be registering some of the shock that John the Baptist brings. Matthew and Luke spot that, this is what Isaiah looked for and yet it is not what anyone expected.

We want to believe there is a story, we keep looking for a pattern and hoping it will turn out well. We are wrong, we really have to look somewhere else and start again. So, it is back the way we came; back into the wilderness, where Israel once got lost, back to baptism, back to a new beginning.

And notice, John wants us to repent. That means he wants us to turn round, think again, understand that we have been so seriously mistaken. John preaches a new beginning. Only when John has done that can Jesus come and *be* the beginning.

John the Baptist tells us to think differently and then Jesus shows us what the difference is. John tells us to face a different direction and then Jesus throws open the doors of the Kingdom. John demands that we give up on our insistence that history will see us right and then Jesus offers us a different history altogether.

History takes us nowhere. Whatever you voted (and even if you did not vote at all) in the referendum on Europe. Whether you hoped for Trump, or Clinton, or loathe them both you come to a place where history does not feel like progress; a place where promises are not kept, where wrong turnings are taken, bad decisions made and the sheer, awkward unpredictability of events messes up the brightest hopes. That is exactly the place we have come to in a world that fought world wars and still goes on fighting, in a generation that watched Live Aid and longed for famine to stop, in places that fear ebola as we once feared AIDs, in a society that wrings its hands as the coral reefs are bleached and the glaciers retreat.

History, and our own endeavor, betrays us. And we have to look for something else. The answer is not John the Baptist. The answer is not 'repent and be sorry'. That is only the very beginning of the answer. John the Baptist arrives to tell us that we are looking in the wrong place. The really good news is that Jesus comes as the new creation, the really good news is that we are offered love when we looked for power, and forgiveness when we wanted someone to blame.

We have to get this straight. Christian faith is not a slightly nicer way to live your life. It is not a mildly more optimistic attitude. Faith is not living in history and hoping for the happy ending. Christian faith is the radical conviction that we keep telling the wrong story, trusting the wrong outcomes believing the wrong people. Power and political promises are the wrong story. They will lead us to a wilderness of our own making and they leave us there. We have to start believing in reconciliation, forgiveness and redemption. We have to look for a new creation founded on love lived out in peace. We have to tell a different story. We have to insist on another story. The evangelists told that story once, now it's our turn.

