

Luke 3:15-22

Baptism

Just before Christmas I kept getting asked questions about King Alfred. This was actually slightly tricky. I tell people I am an historian, and I try to look thoughtful when people ask questions about history. The truth, though, is that I only really know a little bit of history... Mrs. Hoyle will tell you that I know about a fortnight in 1625 and I am a bit unreliable on the final weekend. So, my knowledge of King Alfred rests largely on the Ladybird book I had when I was six. The conversations I had about King Alfred came out of a television series, *The Last Kingdom*. Before that there was a book by Bernard Cornwell. And, before both of those, there was the cracking story the story of the war between Alfred, King of Wessex and Guthrum, ruler of the Danelaw. On the night of 6th January 878 Guthrum caught Alfred by surprise, just down the road in a fortress at Chippenham. Overwhelmed, Alfred had to hide in the marshes of Athelney. Then, Alfred gathered an army from the shires and there was a battle, early in May 878, at Edington where Alfred won a crushing victory. The seal on the victory was not just that the Danes were driven back, but that Guthrum was baptized. Guthrum became a Christian King he took the name of Æthelstan, which was, we should notice, the name of Alfred's elder brother and Alfred became a sort of spiritual foster father. They were family now and when they took oaths the two kings swore by the same God. This was a very famous baptism and it was political as much as it was religious.

And that is the interesting, difficult thing about baptism. Baptism is a truly awkward sacrament; there is more than one thing going on, multiple meanings, a bit of confusion even. If you officiate at baptisms you cannot miss the awkwardness. As a parish priest, years ago, I was asked to baptise two brothers and, stupidly, started with baby. As I reached for the two year old he took the informed and decided view that this was really not for him and legged it up the church, hotly pursued by his father. He was brought back to me howling, baptized by main force and that did not feel quite right. Still that was not as awkward as a friend who had not done all his homework. As he held the baby over the water, he asked the parents, 'How do you name this child?' Back came the answer 'Pagan'.

Let's go back to the beginning. Let's go back to that gospel reading. It arrived ringing bells and sounding drums. John is baptizing and...

the people were filled with expectation

Why; what has got the people on edge? It's baptism that has done it. John is baptizing in the wilderness and that is all wrong. He is the son of a priest; he should be in the Temple, that's the first thing that is wrong. He should be a Temple priest himself. Not only is he not doing that, he is in the *wilderness*, the place Israel is supposed to have left far behind. John has turned the clock back; he is re-living the days that the people of God were looking for a home. And he is baptising Jews. That really is bizarre. Jews only baptised Gentles, this was the way you became a Jew if you converted. You baptise in water as a way of carrying someone through the Red Sea, you tell the old story of Moses and his people about someone who was not part of the story. Baptism is not a rite for faithful Jews. John is using this baptism to tell Jews that they are not Jews at all, they need to convert. That is why the people were so expectant. John is revising the story, it is odd and unsettling

The gospel reading we heard was abbreviated, there were some verses missing. We heard that John was announcing judgement,

His winnowing fork is in his hand, to clear his threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his granary

We did *not* hear that John was also denouncing Herod, saying angry things about Herod's marriage and Herod's rule. You see, there is a very big story going on behind the moment Jesus comes to the Jordan. It is not just a religious story about prophets, Moses, and Abraham and the judgement of God; it is a story about local politics and history; and a story about the Temple and the wilderness. No wonder people were filled with expectation. There was a lot going on.

And that is the thing we need to notice, not a detail, but the sheer complexity of all the details. You see there is a question we do not often ask and it is the big question when you come to this Sunday and this story. The question is 'Why?' Why was Jesus baptized by John? It makes no sense. John had nothing he could give Jesus that Jesus might need. Jesus does not need to be named before God, Jesus does not need to have the forgiveness of sins declared over him. Jesus does not need to be made party of the community. He is the community. Yet, Jesus *is* baptized and in Luke's gospel it is incredibly spare, we rush over it

when all the people were baptized, and when Jesus also had been baptized (3:21)

Jesus is baptized as an act of solidarity. When Prime Ministers tell you they support Aston Villa, or when Deans talk as though they know the difference between the Foo Fighters and Coldplay you know someone is trying to persuade you that they belong, they are normal and you wonder how true that might be. You wonder about their authenticity. Jesus never does that, never adopts a character, never affects an assumption, he is always who he is. And here, in his baptism, there is a steady assertion that the story told at the Jordan, that story about Moses, and the wilderness, and the Temple, and Herod *is his* story. Here Jesus declares that he belonged inside the story of the people's hope. The author of the story becomes the story.

In baptism the lives we lead, the details of the everyday are drenched in God's grace, our stories become the story that began in creation and ends in salvation.

That is what baptism does. It is what that Baptism of Guthrum did, it put him inside a different story, with different relationships. It is what our baptisms do, as the family assembles and a christening robe that belonged to great uncle Albert is wheeled out, and godparents are named, and water is poured and the providence of God proclaimed. A story is told.

Baptism matters. It matters that today, just days after we were talking about Christmas, just days after Kings were kneeling in the mud and straw in Bethlehem, we come to the Jordan and Christ's baptism.

The Christmas story is a great story about God taking the initiative. At Christmas, God takes this life and lives it. God pours himself into human being. And now, today, we ask what that means, what difference does it make? At the Jordan Jesus does not just step into the water, he steps into a story about Moses and Abraham, Herod and the Temple. Jesus is

not generally, vaguely alive in a holy, picture book sort of way; Jesus lives a particular life, there is a rich, dense narrative in which he plays a part. And his baptism is a baptism we share. That is the point. We step into the story too, and all the details of our life is part of that. Nothing is irrelevant, nowhere are the possibilities of sin and grace absent. Jesus became like us so that we can become like him. That's our life's work. Becoming like Christ, in everything, everywhere.

We talk about dying to ourselves so that we can live like Christ. What we mean is that we stop looking in the mirror in order to see ourselves. Christians believe that real life, the life we want to lead is life as Christ lived, *his* compassion, *his* forgiveness, *his* faith. If I want to be really alive that is how I need to live. And that is easy because he has shown us how it is done and it is hard because I keep wanting to be like *me*, not like him. I keep wanting to be tired and sorry for myself, or cross and self-righteous, or clever and brave. I keep wanting to write a different story for myself. Which is why I have to keep coming here, to the cathedral, to be reminded of the real story and to meet all the other people who are having similar or slightly different difficulties with being like Christ.

Baptism is a little thing – water and words, but it is history and salvation. Baptism is the life we try to live together, the life that looks in a mirror to see Christ looking back. It is the crucial, shattering difference between telling a story about Christmas and a crib and telling a story about you and me.