

Parish of Esher  
Christ Church, Esher with St George's, West End

## SERMON

Baptism of Christ, 13 January 2019  
9am Sung Communion, St George's, West End  
10.30am Parish Communion, Christ Church, Esher  
Isaiah 43.1-7; Psalm 29; Luke 3.15-17, 21-22

Rev. William Allberry

*Jesus came from Galilee to the Jordan to be baptised by John.*

A few years ago Joan and I went for a pilgrimage visit to Jordan. Jordan is a country that's crammed with biblical sites, of course, and there are many places that the bible records Jesus as having visited. But the religious highlight of the tour was the visit to the place we've just heard about in the Gospel reading, the place where Jesus was baptised by John, down in the valley in the river Jordan, not far from where it runs into the Dead Sea, some 400 metres below sea level.

The authenticity of the site is beyond question – the evidence of buildings there proves that from the earliest days, Christians visited the site as a place of pilgrimage, because they wanted to be baptised in the same place where Jesus was. The archaeologists have unearthed a remarkable sort of stone-built jetty, where the early Christians stepped into the water to be baptised in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit; and just alongside it the ruins of an impressive Byzantine church with some super mosaic floors. And in the immediate area they've found some 20 ancient sites – churches, baptismal pools, hermits' caves, and ancient hostels able to house dozens of pilgrims. On top of this there's a host of accounts written by medieval pilgrims and travellers which describe those buildings, and the layout of the area. So it's quite clear that this site has been revered through the centuries as the actual place where Jesus was baptised – even though the course of the river itself has changed over the centuries, as often

happens with a meandering river, and it's now a couple of hundred yards from the site.

So this really was the place where it happened. For years in the second half of the last century the area was inaccessible as it was a military zone between Israel and Jordan, and even now you can't approach it from the Israeli side except on one or two days a year. But on the Jordan side of the river border it can be freely visited, and several different churches have been built that mark the significance of the place: not only the place of Jesus's baptism, but also the place where the Israelites crossed the Jordan with Joshua to enter into the Promised Land; and the place where Elijah was said to have ascended into heaven in his fiery chariot.

The essential part of a visit to the Holy Land, and other places where Jesus himself stayed or passed through, is that it brings home the fact that Jesus – the Son of God – was a real human being. At Christmas time we remember that Jesus was born a human baby. Bethlehem, Nazareth, Capernaum, Jerusalem are all places we can visit and know that Jesus really lived in this world. And the site of his baptism is one of the places that first showed the world that he was God's Son: as St Luke tells us, 'A voice from heaven said, "This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased".'

So what were all those early Christians, and medieval Christians, and later Christians doing, and what are pilgrims today doing when they flock to the river Jordan to recall the baptism of Jesus? Some of them, of course, come to be baptised – but most of us have already been baptised and we can't be baptised twice, so we come to recall the vows that were made at our own baptisms, usually by our parents and godparents on our behalf. As we do in churches all over the world, usually on Easter Sunday, when we renew our baptismal vows.

Many of us, most of us, I suppose, were baptised as babies, and so we didn't have the chance to make those promises for ourselves. There are Christians, of course, who think it's wrong to baptise infants as we do in our churches, because they think that you should be able to understand what's happening, you should be able to speak for yourself and make your own decision about becoming a Christian. Baptism, they say, should be a mature, adult response. We should be baptised as adults, like Jesus was. I think this

is wrong, and that we can be quite unapologetic about baptising children and babies, even though they are, naturally, much too young to understand what it's all about. We're not pretending that older children can understand what they're letting themselves in for, or that they can *understand* the significance of the water, and the other symbols that we use in the service. We can't even pretend that the children are *willing* to be baptised – and sometimes we have quite a struggle with the larger ones at the font!

But the argument about *understanding* baptism misses the point. Baptism is only the beginning – it isn't itself the be all and end all. To say that baptism should be put off till the children are older is to attach the wrong significance to it. It's wrong to say that baptism requires a willingness from the child, or a grown-up response. God's grace comes free and unconditionally (the demands come later). Baptism is God's gift. How can we stand in God's way and refuse it?

Being baptised is like going to the Chessington World of Adventures, or Thorpe Park. At Chessington there's a tremendous range of rides and exhibits, and things to do all day. And the great thing about it is that once you're inside the rides are all free. When you come in, you pay your (staggeringly high) entry fee, and you're given a ticket; then you pass through the gate, and everything's free.

If you take a child in with you, and the child's asleep when you pay your money and go through, when the child wakes up inside he doesn't start to complain and say, 'I missed the entrance gate! I want to come in and pay for the ticket again!' Once you're inside, the act of passing through the gate isn't exciting anymore. You didn't come in just for the fun of buying a ticket – you came in to do all the things you can do once you're in!

So what is this Christian theme park that we were brought into perhaps unawares? Well, one of the many attractions is belonging to a family, the church. At Baptism we become members one of another – young and old, rich and poor; we're joined, and committed to one another. That in itself is something we can be proud to offer our young. But more important than that is the fact that we are given God's Spirit – not in any dramatic way, but acknowledged as children of God. We're told by his Word that being a Christian involves caring about our brothers and sisters – and not only for

brother and sister *Christians*, but for all the people of the world – and being a Christian involves doing something about it, sharing in God’s bias towards those who are poor and needy, those who are sick and oppressed in any way. And the main attraction in this theme park is liberation – the Christian faith frees us from all that holds us back and prevents us from being full, complete beings. Christian faith frees us from the fear of evil and death – because the Christian can look death in the eyes and not be afraid: we’re baptised not only into the life of Jesus but also into his death – and nothing that life may throw at us can ultimately harm us, because Jesus has overcome evil for each one of us.

The babies we baptise can’t understand that; the children in our churches can’t understand that; and I’m not sure we as adults always understand the full implications of that, either; but we still profess and call ourselves Christians, and rightly, because whether we understand it or not, whether we deserve it or not, God reaches out and gives us his love, and his acceptance.

So let’s be sure that we are right in baptising babies, because all we are doing is paying the entrance fee for them, and making all this available. They don’t know much yet, but they’ll learn soon enough that life is more than just eating and drinking, waking and sleeping, more even than thinking and loving. They’ll learn soon enough that there’s a dark side of life too. But they’ll learn also that we are given power to reach out to God, as he reaches out to us. At Jesus’s baptism the heavens were opened, and the voice spoke. Baptism is an opening of the heavens for each one of us, whatever age we were when we were baptised; and the voice from the cloud might have said each time, as it did on that day on the banks of the Jordan river, ‘This is my child, whom I love; with him (or her) I am well pleased.’