



Sermon preached by Penny Flynn on 11th January 2026

Readings: *Matthew 3:13-17; Isaiah 42:1-9; Acts 10:4-43*

Epiphany I

‘See, the former things have come to pass, and new things I now declare’ *Isaiah 42:9*

I was thinking ‘new beginnings’ – ‘a fresh start’, which is indicated by that text; but then I wondered if that was right – that in the gospel, Jesus’ baptism was not a new beginning or a fresh start for him but was in fact The Beginning, The Start. Reading Matthew’s gospel, there’s a gap of information - up to 28 years elapse between the return of the infant Jesus and his parents from Egypt, to the appearance of John the Baptist preparing the way for the adult Jesus. Jesus’ baptism marks the formal Beginning of his ministry; a change, yes, from his former life, but not a *new* beginning such as baptism would indicate for any other person. Jesus had no need to change his ways, repent, amend his way of living. John appeared somewhat shocked that Jesus should come to him for baptism – ‘I need to be baptised by you, and do *you* come to *me*?’

But I’ll take a step back for a moment. *Reference the church magazine ‘Place Matters’ December and January and read the ‘letter from a minister’.* A big ‘thankyou’ to David Cornick for such a clear lesson in the history of timing of festival-celebration as the Christian church developed. Knowing that Epiphany would have been celebrated *last* Sunday, having looked at the texts for today I knew this morning’s wouldn’t be an Epiphany service. But the letter informs us that, in the Christmas cycle, the church first had Epiphany, and that in Alexandria in Egypt in the second century Epiphany commemorated Christ’s baptism; whilst in Milan in the 370s and 380s it was linked to the journey of the magi. So there is a dual focus, and remembering Christ’s baptism at this time makes sense when we know that *and I quote* ‘Advent was the late-comer to the party. Its origins seem to be in a period of preparation for Epiphany-tide baptisms in France and Spain.’

So, on this first Sunday after Epiphany, we hear of Jesus coming south from Galilee – his time had come. God’s plan was being worked out, put into place, as we can see in the predictions of the Old Testament. First John the Baptist – Matthew 3:3 ‘This is the one of whom the prophet Isaiah spoke when he said, ‘The voice of one crying out in the wilderness: “Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight.”’ And then Jesus - Isaiah 42:1 ‘Here is my servant, whom I uphold, my chosen, in whom my soul delights;’ The people were waiting for a Messiah – Here He is, He has arrived; although it is quite a leap from ‘servant’ to Messiah; although, at first, they wondered if *John* was the one – but John assured them he baptized with water for repentance and that one more powerful was coming who would baptise with the Holy Spirit and with fire. Here is that One. And this beginning came, not in a city in a central square of official venue, but in the countryside, by a river – with the people of Jerusalem and all Judea, including the religious officials, present none-the-less.

John *knew* who Jesus was. They hadn’t met before, yet John knew. He preached a baptism of repentance – He rejected the Pharisees and Sadducees because he surmised they had missed that point. Contrastingly, he initially rejected Jesus because he *knew* Jesus did *not* need to repent. So why did Jesus present himself for baptism? Why could he not have ministered without being baptised first? Surely, the public statement, visibility to the people, acknowledging John’s work, were part of it. Without saying it, Jesus was announcing his presence, and enabling John to proclaim the arrival of his successor, the One of whom he’d spoken.

But there’s more than that. As John protested, Jesus countered with the words: ‘Let it be so now; for it is proper for us in this way to fulfil all righteousness.’ What did he mean? ‘The term ‘righteousness seems here to indicate a divine requirement to be accomplished. The adjective ‘all’ means that it is not simply a special requirement for the Son of God but one that joins him with fellow Christians in carrying out ‘all that God requires’. These are the first words Jesus speaks in Matthew’s gospel, and they are a statement that describes Jesus’ function throughout the Gospel. ‘He moves about Galilee and later Jerusalem as the obedient Son, who carries out the plan of the

Father. He not only teaches but in fact demonstrates the divine will, and in doing so becomes the prototype of all his followers. Here at the beginning of his ministry such a course is set.' *{Texts for Preaching Yr A p.98}* John Proctor writes: 'Accepting baptism is the right thing for (Jesus) to do. Matthew's gospel portrays Jesus as constantly concerned for what is right. Here at the start it is important that he identify with the people he comes to serve, that he show his solidarity with them and immerse himself in their hopes and needs.' [Matthew, the People's Bible Commentary, p.32]

In the reading from Isaiah we heard a promise from the Lord to God's people in exile. God would be sending one who would make things right again; in fact, the words sound like an introduction to one already present: 'Here is my servant... my chosen, in whom my soul delights'. Placed as it is with the Gospel reading today, we readily and reasonably assume this 'servant' to be Jesus – that Jesus' arrival is the fulfilment of this prophecy, which also tells us of the purpose of the servant – namely to bring justice to the nations. Twice we heard 'he will bring forth justice', and once that 'he will not grow faint or be crushed until he has brought forth justice in the earth.' Isaiah's words proceed to tell how the Servant will work: he will be strong, whilst quiet, gentle, caring, honouring the weak – all characteristics seen in Jesus.

Matthew v16 '...when Jesus had been baptized, just as he came up from the water, suddenly the heavens were opened to him and he saw **the Spirit of God descending like a dove and alighting on him.**' Isaiah 42v1: **I have put my spirit upon him;** Jesus and God's Servant are empowered by the Spirit for their task, their task of bringing justice to the world – something the world has always seemed incapable of doing for itself.

Matthew's gospel tells us 'He saw the Spirit of God descending...' Jesus saw the dove. Mark's gospel says the same. Luke's merely states the fact of the dove descending, and John says 'I saw the dove descending'. Variations, but no doubt. The same Holy Spirit with which John the Baptist said The One to come after himself would baptise others.

And then there was the **voice**. "And a voice from heaven said, 'This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased.'" In the psalm set for today, psalm 29, the voice of God features throughout. In that psalm, the voice of the Lord is in everything to do with creation and particularly in a great storm – but the Lord sits enthroned over the flood and as king forever. In Isaiah, we hear the voice of the Lord in our mind as we read and listen because the whole passage is God speaking. Again God, the Lord, reminds us of His role in creation, in calling the Servant. And at Jesus' baptism, the Voice from heaven made known the person of Jesus Christ, their relationship, and God's pleasure. 'The voice of God goes out to all the world' we sang. Throughout the scriptures, God's voice is heard in so many ways. This was unique though. This was God the Father, speaking to his Son, affirming the rightness of the moment, but so all would know and not be in any doubt. This is Jesus, at the start of his mission, setting out to fulfil his Father's plan: preaching the good news, building relationships, healing, comforting, challenging; giving joy *to the hopeless*, peace to the weary, binding up the broken-hearted. Also, setting the example, showing the way, teaching, gently but firmly leading – just as Isaiah's servant was to do.

After Jesus' death and resurrection, the good news really began to spread. We heard Peter, speaking to assembled people in the house of Cornelius, a Roman centurion, a devout God-fearing man who prayed constantly. Knowing Jesus' teaching and command to preach the good news, Peter told them about Jesus, and the following verses relate the coming of the Holy Spirit upon all who heard.

We are part of this story. As Peter said, 'in every nation anyone who fears him (God) and does what is right is acceptable to him.' It is exciting. At the baptism of Jesus, God is telling His Son that he loves him and is pleased with him. Jesus is telling God and the people around him that he is ready to undertake God's mission. I conclude with a quote from *Tom Wright*: '.... Those who in repentance and faith follow Jesus through baptism and along the road he will now lead us will find, if we listen, that the same voice from heaven speaks to us as well. As we learn to put aside our own plans and submit to his, we may be granted moments of vision, glimpses of his greater reality. And at the centre of that sudden sight we will find our loving father, affirming us as his children,

equipping us, too, with his spirit so that our lives may be swept clean and made ready for use.’
[Matthew for Everyone p22]

That use, as we know, is to continue the work Jesus began, sharing the gospel, the good news of Jesus Christ with those we meet – the privilege and responsibility of being members of God’s family, God’s Church. Amen.

Penny Flynn

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