The Baptism of Christ
St Mary the Virgin, Saint Briavels, and Saint Mary Magdalene, Hewelsfield. 2020.

Acts 10:34-43
Matthew 3:13-end

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

I want to begin this morning with a disclaimer: the church always makes things more complicated than they really are!

And where we are right now, in January, is a really good example of this. Now, January is a tricky month for us if we try to tell the story of Jesus in a chronological, linear way, because we jump about all over the place.

Obviously, Christmas is the celebration of his birth. Anyone who was in church on New Year’s Day will then have heard the account of his naming and circumcision on the eighth day of his life. - I’m not going to ask you whether you were in church on New Year’s Day, or rather enjoying some respite from the celebrations of the night before! - After that, the timeframe gets a bit wonky! Last Sunday as we celebrated the epiphany, we were remembering an account of Jesus probably about two years old. Today we’ve got Jesus, and John the Baptist, as adults. Probably about 30 years old. The end of the month, actually on the second day of February, sees us back in the second month of Jesus’s life for the feast of Candlemas.

So my brief advice to you this morning is this: don’t try to do January chronologically! You will get terribly seasick if you try. But think of this season of Epiphany as a collection of stories and accounts from across the four Gospels, which tell us about who Jesus is, and what he is going to do. Christmas is about God becoming human. His naming is about fulfilling prophecy. Epiphany is about the fact that Jesus is for everyone, and not just for the Jewish nation. Candlemas, the end of the month, is about remembering that even at the very beginning of his life, Christ is born to die, born to save.

And today’s festival, the Baptism of Christ, marks the beginning of his public ministry. Here is the man, the man who will walk the roads and lanes and lakesides of Galilee, who will tread the path to Jerusalem, who will heal and forgive, who will teach, convict and challenge. And we find echoes here, or perhaps harbingers, of the nature of this man who is going to transform the world, who’s going to transform our lives. What kind of God might our God be? Well, notice that there’s a fingerprint of the Trinity in this account, with the Son being baptised, the dove descending, and the voice of the Father. In some of the accounts everyone can see the dove and hear the Father, and in some they are reserved for Christ alone. But here’s a man who is God. Here is a man who carries divinity and humanity equally and entirely. But here is a man also who is a real part of the structures and culture into which he is born. John the Baptist says, “are you mad? I can’t baptise you!”, But Jesus says, “no, I want to experience the same ritual, the same journey through life as all of these other people around me.” This is about Jesus participating in our life. And so John, protesting, baptises Jesus. And in most of the accounts what immediately happens after his baptism is that Jesus goes directly to the wilderness where he is tempted by Satan. We will read that story on the first Sunday of Lent. So here is a man who is a warrior, not against men and women, but against the powers of darkness. Here is the man who stares down Satan and ultimately, on Easter Morning, empties hell of its power and sends the devil fleeing.
So this wonderful Festival that we celebrate today kind of begins to link up Christmas and Easter, and we will see more and more of that as we read our way through the Bible in these coming weeks between now and Easter.

And I think this thing about Jesus living a human life, being part of the worshiping community of the Jews in Palestine at that time is really important, because it’s another example of the fact that Jesus is genuinely human. Because he gets stuck into life, we know that he gets stuck into our life. And so we can begin to see connections between what he does and what we do.

And that’s why the middle part of today’s service is going to be a little bit different to normal. In just a moment I will stop clattering on, and our focus will turn to the font. There are a couple of times in the year when the church invites us to remember our baptism, our christening. One of them of course is Easter, and the other one is today, this Festival of the Baptism of Christ. Today we remember Jesus being baptised by John, going through that ritual, that symbolic, public expression of repentance. At Easter we remember what it is that baptism does for all of us. The new life that it gives us. And so in just a moment we will turn where we are, and focus on the font. The place, if you like, of beginnings. Where our Christian life begins. I wonder where you were baptised? Some of you might even have been baptised here in this font. I was baptised in a gorgeous church in Dorset, and even though I’ve never been back there for another service, actually every time I stand at any font, in any church, I’m back there. And so are you. The thing about fonts is that they all point to the same God. They are simple are they? Stone, or maybe metal or even wood. And water. I might have said to you before that there’s a reason why God tends to talk to us through simple things, and that’s because he knows how simple we are! He doesn’t try to make our brains explode with complicated things, instead he uses stone and water, bread and wine. And so today we remember our own christening. Our own baptism. Even if we can’t actually remember it, and I can’t. I was nine months old. The previous Bishop of Gloucester, Bishop Michael, used to say that it’s really important to say I am baptised, not I was baptised. I am baptised. This thing that happened once, ages ago probably for most of us, carries on being true every day. The water has changed us. I sometimes refer to it as the holy elastic band. At the font God attaches his holy elastic band to us, so that no matter how far we run, no matter in what direction we roam off, we are always attached to holiness. We are always attached to heaven. And we just come pinging back.

That’s what Saint Peter is trying to say in that speech that we heard part of as our first reading. He says that what begins at Jesus’ baptism is this epic story of ministry, healing, defeating the devil, death, resurrection and fellowship. And it begins, that public story, with this moment that we remember today when Jesus associates himself with us by doing something that was not necessary for him. Why does God need to be baptised? Well because we need to be baptised, and God is with us.

And even if you can’t remember your own baptism, all these themes were there too. We are people of the Trinity. We are people for whom ritual and ceremony offer structure and explanation of what is happening to us spiritually. And we are people too, from whom the devil will ultimately flee, for we wear the badge of the baptised, risen and ascended Christ, the cross, the sign and seal of our risen life foreshadowed here as Jesus descends into the waters, and the whole world begins to change.

Amen.