

**Rebecca Newland 7th January 2007 St Philips Anglican church, O'Connor**

Baptism of our Lord C: Isaiah 43:1 – 7, Psalm 29, Acts 8:14 – 17, Luke 3:15 – 22

**The New Year needs the Holy Spirit and Prayer.**

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

Well we have just about come through Christmas. Christmas trees are starting to be pulled down. New toys have lost some of their glamour and excitement. Businesses are opening again. I don't think the shops ever did close very much. The New Year has started and we are in that funny stage when we are still getting our heads around the fact it is now 2007. In amongst all that we have celebrated epiphany, the revelation of Jesus Christ as the light and glory of God. I will be leaving St. Philips in the next week and Rob will be back. There is newness and familiarity all around us. And today we remember the Baptism of Jesus, which marks the beginning of Jesus public ministry. It too is a story of newness and familiarity. There is the ancient Jewish expectation of the Messiah and the new possibility, the new kid on the block, Jesus Christ. I don't know how many of you have thought much about the coming year. Most of us are probably beyond new years resolutions having discovered that they don't actually work. However I would guess many of us have a sense of looking forward into the year ahead. Perhaps imagining what might be in front of us. Thinking about what will be happening in this new time for our children or grandchildren. Maybe hoping that things will be a little different for us – maybe a little less stressed, more settled. Maybe we will have chance to take that holiday, or get into the garden finally. Some of us have good reason to be worried and concerned about the year ahead for all sorts of reasons – family worries, money issues, job insecurity amongst others. Yet we humans are a species that thinks ahead and makes plans even if it is only a little. If we are sensible we look at what is coming up and try to work out how we can best deal with the challenge.

And today is the day to look at what the story of Jesus baptism can tell us about new beginnings and how we can make the most of the year ahead, be good stewards so to speak of the time God has given us. We are about to embark on another year long round of Gospel readings, this time from Luke. So it is a good time to think about what this baptism tells us about living as Christians in this new year, not just any person but a particular type of person, a Christian one.

As Christians we are all of course baptized like Jesus. Despite the images we use and the language that is sometimes connected with Baptism, it is not a bath. If it were a bath, you would need it again and again. Baptism is more like a funeral pyre that leads to new a life. Some parts of the Eastern Orthodox Church sing funeral dirges at baptisms as a sign that the old has passed away. After the actual baptism there is great singing and joy for the new life ahead. It is actually meant to symbolize the transformation of life in Christ,

the dying to the old and the resurrection to the new. Amongst other things Jesus' Baptism signaled a new beginning in his life. It also signaled to Jesus and those who witnessed the baptism, that he was the beloved Son of God in whom God was well pleased. Through our Baptism we are joined to Jesus in this new life – in its transformation and in ministry. In our Baptism we become Kingdom people, the new Kingdom of God. Have you ever read a piece of scripture and re-read it later and realized you have missed something really important, in fact central? Well I confess I seem to do it a lot and I certainly did with this passage. It wasn't until the third reading that I realized how central the Holy Spirit was to the whole story and subsequently how important it was to this New Kingdom life. This Baptism story seems to me to be actually about the Holy Spirit not water. In Luke's Gospel one would expect the Holy Spirit to be a key player in the story and it is, right there in the teaching of John the Baptist and directly after the moment of Baptism itself.

The Holy Spirit tends to get forgotten a lot like that. It gets a Guernsey at each Pentecost but little mention in between. But how dependent on the Holy Spirit we are?! It is fire and life. The Spirit burns away the dross and showers us with gifts. John the Baptist says that he only baptizes with water but the baptism of Christ is both water and Spirit. At Jesus own baptism the heavens open, the Spirit descends and the voice of God is heard.

It is the Spirit that subsequently drives Jesus into the wilderness and yet comforts and protects him. It is the Spirit who is 'upon him', who moves and enables him to proclaim the Good News, to heal and teach. It is the Spirit who strengthens, unites and gifts the grieving disciples after Jesus has left them.

Forgetting the Holy Spirit is a bit like forgetting our right hand. Perhaps our forgetfulness is related to our fears of what the Holy Spirit might move and enable us to do. It is dangerous. Being a Christian is dangerous and challenging and if it is not I wonder are we growing and allowing ourselves to be transformed? Are we making a difference in the world or are we just waiting for the comfort of heaven? Are we allowing ourselves to be transformed or are we hunkered down in our bunkers?

In this story there is the salutary example of John the Baptist whose courageous stance put him in gaol and sent him ultimately to the executioner.

The Holy Spirit might move us to do all sorts of things for heavens sake!! But as sure as day follows night the Holy Spirit will also equip us for the task at hand. As you contemplate the year ahead ask the Holy Spirit to guide you and empower you in your Christian journey. Open yourself up to Gods Spirit and let it take you to new and interesting lands in yourself. As a Christian community, invite the Holy Spirit to energize and move you into new directions and new expressions of ministry. As you grapple with worries and concerns allow the Holy Spirit to comfort and guide you. I know I'll be relying heavily on the Holy Spirit in my new ministry at St. Albans!

A simple prayer to the Holy Spirit goes:

Come Lord

Come down

Come in

Come among us

You can even just say, Come Lord, Come Down.

There is another thing in this story that tends to be overlooked. That is the fact that it was after Jesus was baptized and while he was *praying* that the Holy Spirit came to him and God's voice of approval rang out. The fact that Jesus was praying sits there buried in the text. Prayer gets spoken about so much it begins to have a very tired ring about it. Yet it is perhaps the most important spiritual discipline we practice. Jesus took time to pray all through his life and ministry. All his important decisions were made after times of prayer. It was while they were praying that the Holy Spirit came to the disciples at Pentecost and St. Paul urged his listeners to always pray without ceasing.

In the year ahead I hope we can all make time for prayer. Prayer that connects us to God and ourselves, prayer that opens us up to the Holy Spirit and invites the Spirit's power to transform and move us in new directions, prayer that feeds the soul. There are hundreds of ways to pray and thousands of books to read about it. Whatever your method, whatever your abilities just do it – as the Nike ad goes. Pray alone, pray together, and pray in the wilderness, at the beach, in the church, in bed, in the shower. Make God and the present moment your constant companion. If you are after a truly simple way to pray then be completely attentive to the moment you are in – whatever you are doing. God is more near and present to us than we are to ourselves. To become close to God become truly present to the moment.

And pray for each other. I will be praying for you in the months ahead. Praying that the Holy Spirit will gift you to live out your Baptismal promises and that your 2007 will be blessed, challenging and full of love and joy.

Amen.