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Baptism of Jesus Year A: Isa 42:1-9, Psalm 29, Acts 10:34-43, Matt 3:13-17

### **Our Identity is in Christ Jesus**

So it is now 2011!! We are over ten years into the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Almost ten years into the so-called war on terror (what a ridiculous phrase) and the fighting in Afghanistan and Iraq. The last decade has seen the end of John Howard's government and the rise and fall of Kevin Rudd. Also the rise and fall of Mark Latham – remember him? It has seen the election, sort of, of Australia's first female prime minister. Drought, tsunamis, floods, earthquakes and hurricanes have all played their usual role of destruction and chaos. And we are now into the next decade. I wonder what it will bring? I wonder who we will be as we face the challenges it will surely present?

The beginning of each New Year is often a time of reflection as we think about the year ahead and make our plans. It is often a time to re-orientate ourselves and decide on what type of person we would like to be, what we would like to achieve and how we can better ourselves and our situation. Some of that takes the form of new years resolutions and writing lists and planning. The greetings we receive often express the hope that the year ahead will be good and blessed. There are many questions to ask as we make our plans but there is one central question that must be answered. In fact if we skip this question then our plans will likely fall flat and come to nothing.

The question is - who are we? If we do not answer this question then our focus can be all wrong. We can go off on tangents that have no grounding in reality and we will be fighting the tide as we attempt to head out on new seas. We need to ask that as a community of course but the first question is who are we as individuals? So - who are you?

Knowing who we are is no small task particularly in our modern context. In this brave new post-modern world the question of identity is a vexed issue. Old standards have disappeared, grand narratives that tell us who we are, are seen as just another made up story, authority in all its forms is questioned and critiqued. Psychologists argue about whether we have a fixed identity or whether it is fluid.

Biologists argue about whether it is formed primarily through our genetic makeup or how we have been brought up, our environment. As we go through the decades of our life we can become less sure of who we are and what influences that. Some of us reinvent ourselves every few years or so, finding old pictures no longer helpful or useful.

Well today's readings and remembrance of the Baptism of Jesus give us the rock bottom answer. As you know we are in the season of Epiphany where we look at what our scripture readings reveal to us about Jesus Christ, this new special baby born in Bethlehem. The beginning of Matthew's gospel is all geared towards asking the question - who is Jesus? Matthew up until this point has presented him as a descendent of Abraham and the son of David and as Christ the Messiah. He has been revealed to us as the King of the nations and the child of Mary and Joseph. Today we jump 30 odd years into his life at the very beginning of his public ministry when John baptizes him. This dramatic event on the River Jordan shouts to us loud and clear who and what Jesus is. He is the beloved Son of God in whom God is well pleased.

Baptism is one of the two major sacraments of the church. You have all, pretty much, gone through this rite yourselves and perhaps sponsored others who have. You have all been present at Baptisms. In Baptism we follow in Jesus footsteps where we are washed with water, signifying the cleansing from sin and the beginning of a new life. It is hard to imagine that Jesus had any sin to contend with so commentators suggest his Baptism was an act of solidarity with those he came to serve. It was also the consecration to his vocation, his ministry and task. It names his primary identity – he is the Son of God.

It has the same function for all his followers. When we are baptised we are named, given our identity in the triune God. We are baptised in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. As we rise up from the waters of Baptism we begin our new identity as heirs of God's love and promise. The waters of Baptism are the waters of death and new life and a new identity. This new identity is an identity that is grounded, formed and lived out in Christ. It is not under, above or beside but in Christ. For me that takes some pondering and thinking - my identity, who I am, is in Christ Jesus. The Greek word for in, *en*, means remaining *within*. It has the primary idea of rest and continuance in place and space.

There are many verses of scripture that help us understand what this means but I am not going to go through them. What I suggest is you have a read of the letter to the Colossians, which will help you get a better picture of this reality. The entire letter is useful for this purpose but there is one wonderful passage that sets the scene in describing the one in whom we have our identity (Colossians 1.15):

*<sup>5</sup>He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation; <sup>16</sup>for in him all things in heaven and on earth were created, things visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or powers—all things have been created through him and for him. <sup>17</sup>He himself is before all things, and in him all things hold together. <sup>18</sup>He is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, so that he might come to have first place in everything. <sup>19</sup>For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, <sup>20</sup>and through him God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, by making peace through the blood of his cross.*

Our identity is in this Christ – the one who redeems, reconciles and brings peace. Our identity is in the Lord of the Universe, the first-born of creation and in the Word made flesh. In Christ all the fullness of God dwells and we are in him. Jesus himself appears to have used much more poetic language when he spoke of this indwelling. In John's Gospel he describes himself as the vine and we are the branches, we are connected to him and part of him in the most organic way. Again it is about being within, in place and space. Our other sacrament, the Eucharist, takes into the heart of this understanding, this profound and deep connection within Christ and with each other. Jesus had this other beautiful word for his relationship with us. He called his followers friends. True friendship is actually a rare thing on this earth. It means more than just getting on well with someone. It means identity in thought, heart and Spirit. Think of your closest and dearest friend and the times you spend together and then we start to get an inkling of what intimacy, friendship, identity in Christ is like.

Now this should make us sit up and take notice or at least begin to look around. If this is a reality and not some abstract, philosophical idea, then what does it mean for us as we look into the new year and make our plans? I don't know about you but I can go through my day and week and year hardly conscious that I am in this intimate, close and connected

relationship with Christ. I can certainly act as if I have another identity entirely. One constituted more by my fears and anxieties than my being in my Lord.

The orthodox tradition tells us that this is because our perceiving minds are clouded. That is, the part of ourselves that can perceive and know Christ's presence and know our connection to him is fragmented and darkened. This is why spiritual disciplines are so important, particularly the practice of regular, daily prayer and meditation. We pray not because we doubt our salvation or God's goodness or not just because we are interceding for others but because we need to train our minds to become aware, more and more conscious of the love and presence of God in Christ Jesus. Our prayer practice is meant to set us up for a continuous love relationship with God. Thankfully we have the Holy Spirit to help us in this journey.

You know the word religion comes from the Latin *re* (again) + *ligare* (to connect, as in English *ligament*). It is about re-connection to the divine, to the source of life. For Christians Jesus is the way to this re-connection. In him we are re-connected to the triune God and the universe. As the Colossian reading says we are reconciled. I think this year I am going to be unashamedly religious. Religion of course is almost a dirty word in some circles. Perhaps this is why we in the church have adopted the less offensive word 'spirituality' when we talk about our faith. But our faith is about a relationship, a deep and abiding connection with God. It is a religion in the deepest sense of the word. Our identity, our very being as individuals and as a worshipping community is in Jesus Christ.

May we all become more and more aware of this truth and reality as we embark on another year. May we live each day in the knowledge of our true identity and of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Let us pray....

Amen