

The Baptism of Christ

John the Baptist. We had heard about him in the run-up to Christmas. His mother Elizabeth was a cousin of Mary the mother of Jesus, and Mary had been to visit Elizabeth, when they were both miraculously pregnant. Elizabeth had thought she was past child-bearing age, but was now expecting a child, whom she and her husband Zechariah called John, as the angel that had appeared to Zechariah had instructed them. We do not know how much Jesus and John saw of each other as they were growing up, but here they meet as mature men of 30. John understood his divine mission was to fulfil the prophecy of Isaiah, to be the messenger, the herald, to prepare the way for the Lord. He was urging people to repent of their sins, and to be baptised in the river Jordan, to symbolise the washing away of sins, to be free of the old life and ready to welcome the Lord.

My husband and I spent Christmas in a place called St. Jean de Luz, on the south west coast of France, right up against the Spanish border. That St. Jean (John) is not the evangelist, but John the Baptist, who is the patron saint of the town. The church is dedicated to Jean-Baptiste, and is in fact a very famous church. It was there in 1660 that one of the greatest French kings, Louis XIV, married Maria Teresa, the daughter of the Spanish king. It was an important dynastic marriage, as it marked the end of 30 years of war between Spain and France. The church is large, built of stone, with a great octagonal tower. Inside it is about double the length, breadth and height of St. Stephens, with remarkably few windows. This of course makes it dark, but when I attended a service on the evening of Christmas Day, it was alight with candles and lights. Immediately striking was the reredos, the great carved screen behind the altar, painted gold, it glittered in the light. Eighteen full size saints were standing in the niches, and there was John the Baptist in central position. We heard in the reading that he was wearing a camel skin, on this statue it was certainly an animal skin, thick and furry, as he stood upright and strong with his staff in his hand looking out at the congregation. Any resemblance to St. Stephen's? At the top of our altar painting we have God the father, the creator, so do they in an attitude of blessing with the earth's sphere behind.

The service I attended was the third they had held on Christmas day, as well as a midnight mass on Christmas Eve. About 200 people were there, which I found enormously encouraging, when we are always being told how Christianity is in decline in Europe. I had a very inadequate service sheet, which in no particular order gave carols, prayers, and sung liturgy for the congregation to join in. We sang Silent Night – though this was *douce nuit*, sweet night – and instead of sleep in heavenly peace, we had *c'est l'amour infini* – it is infinite love. Then shepherds in the fields, and the chorus *Gloria in Excelsis Deo*. I got really lost with some of the sung responses in the communion service, then realised they were singing in Basque, the language of the Pyrenees, a language totally unlike either French or Spanish.

The rest of the service fortunately was in French which I could just about follow. The prayers of intercession, like ours, for the poor, the sick, the lonely, and the persecuted Christians in the Middle East; the Eucharistic prayers, the peace - all very familiar. A silver-haired priest presided, and I was interested to see that he was supported by 3 women, who read the lessons

and helped distribute the wafers. One of them was the cantor who led the singing, she had a wonderful voice. I meant to say the singing was accompanied by the great organ, situated at the back of the church.

The readings were Christmas readings, the prophecy from Isaiah, an epistle I couldn't catch which, and the great Christmas gospel, John 1. *In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.* I was fascinated that the French used *verbe* for word, not the usual word which is *parole*. It sounds very odd in English, *in the beginning was the verb and the verb was with God, and the verb was God.* It set me thinking. The John passage is describing a great mystery, at the end of the passage it is stated '*the word became flesh and dwelt among us*' so it is clear the Word of God means Jesus. I am sure you remember from grammar lessons that a verb is a doing word, so it made sense – the word or verb of God, Jesus, was not just going to be a presence, he was going to do. And in this account of his baptism, we see him beginning to do.

John had already started on his God-given ministry. We are told in Luke that *the child John grew and became strong in spirit; and he lived in the desert until he appeared publicly to Israel.* It has often been said that John was the last of the Old Testament prophets, his message similar to that of Isaiah and Jeremiah; that the people of Israel had drifted away from God and needed to repent. If we had met John today, we might want to give him a wide berth, a fanatic, a wild man in camel skin and eating the honey and locusts he found in the desert. But crowds came to see him and to be baptised, though he didn't mince words when condemning sinful behaviour. He was well known throughout the land. People kept asking him 'are you the Christ?', but all the time John insisted that '*after me will come one more powerful than I, the thongs of whose sandals I am not worthy to stoop down and untie*'. Then Jesus comes to the Jordan, and is recognised by John, who says it is I who should be baptised by you. Matthew 3 v 15 Jesus replied – '*it is proper for us to do this to fulfil all righteousness*'. Then John consented and baptised Jesus.

Incidentally, the gospel accounts of John the Baptist and the baptism of Jesus, are not the sole source of this historic event. A similar account is given by the contemporary Jewish historian Josephus.

What do we make of Jesus' reply 'it is proper for us to do this to fulfil all righteousness'? Jesus was without sin, so why did he need to repent? It is striking that both Jesus and John exhibit such humility. John disclaiming that he was the Christ but just the path-maker, and Jesus putting himself alongside all the penitents wishing to start afresh. Perhaps he was demonstrating that he was about to embark on a new way of life by starting his ministry. This humility follows on from the birth in a stable in a small unimportant town like Bethlehem. Just as this humble birth was marked by angels singing in heaven, here this humble submission to baptism is marked by heaven being torn open and the Spirit descending on him like a dove. And a voice came from heaven: You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased. Last week we heard of the Epiphany, the showing of the Christ child to the gentile world – here it is the showing that Jesus, the carpenter's son, is the Son of God.

Jesus then goes into the wilderness to think and pray about what he was going to do and what he was not going to do, which we think about during Lent. John, because of his fearless denunciation of Herod, is arrested and put in prison, and later meets a terrible death.

What does this story mean to us? Most of us will have been baptised either as infants or as adults. We promised, or it was promised on our behalf, to fight against the world, the flesh and the devil. Difficult promises to keep. We live in the world: consumerism, the love of money and what money can buy is all around us. For some of us it is the lack of money, the lack of opportunities that oppress us. We are human beings, but must resist the temptation to indulge the flesh, is it cheap food that has led to this epidemic of obesity, or is it self-indulgence? Do we worry more about our appearance than the state of our souls? As for fighting the devil or evil, when we take a moral position, we can be accused of hypocrisy or being a goody-goody. Society tends to laugh at puritans, thinking them kill-joys. John the Baptist would attract ridicule if he walked down Oxford Street today. The poet Swinburne accused Jesus of being the pale Galilean, who extracted all colour from life. This is not true, Jesus said *'I am come to give you life, and for you to live it to the full.'* Nonetheless, it is difficult to steer a course in today's world between enjoying what the world has to offer, while keeping our eyes on Jesus and what he wants us to do. We should expect to be criticized, as Jesus said in Luke 7 v33 *'John the Baptist came neither eating bread or drinking wine, and you say 'he had a demon. The Son of Man came eating and drinking, and you say 'Here is a glutton and a drunkard a friend of tax collectors and sinners* But we are not alone. When we are baptised we are welcomed into the church community, and the fellowship of other Christians supports us as we travel the path together.

John the Baptist gives advice in Luke 3, *'The man with two tunics should share with him who has none, and the one who has food should do the same.* He told the tax collectors not to embezzle, the soldiers not to extort money, not to accuse people falsely, and to be content with their pay. Jesus gave lots of similar advice – be honest, be generous, think of others.

Going back to the church of John the Baptist in St Jean de Luz, I will translate part of the priest's Christmas message. 'Prepare the way for the Lord, make straight paths for him'. We have heard the message of the prophet Isaiah, the time is favourable to put it into practice. May each one in their own way and as much as they can manage, make a special effort to walk in this direction. What a great step that would be for our human communities who more often prefer to lower their arms saying the path is too difficult and one could do nothing. A small step, a tiny step, a smile, a gesture of friendship – that could change everything, and even cure old wounds. He is saying that's the message of Isaiah is not just for John the Baptist, but we too by our actions can prepare the way for Jesus.

So let us, by following Jesus, and fulfilling our baptism vows, realise that we may be preparing the path for Him to come to others.