

9th January 2022 – Morning Service

Baptism of Christ

Emma Alston

Call to Worship

We give this time to God; we offer our worship to the God who loves us, the God who knows each one of us by name, the God who calls us into relationship with him.

StF 28 – Jesus calls us here to meet him

- 1) Jesus calls us here to meet him
As, through word and song and prayer,
We affirm God's promised presence
Where his people live and care.
Praise the God who keeps his promise;
Praise the Son who calls us friends;
Praise the Spirit who, among us,
To our hopes and fears attends.
- 2) Jesus calls us to confess him
Word of life and Lord of all,
Sharer of our flesh and frailness,
Saving all who fail or fall.
Tell his holy human story;
Tell his tales that all may hear;
Tell the world that Christ in glory
Came to earth to meet us here.
- 3) Jesus calls us to each other,
Vastly different though we are;
Creed and colour, class and gender
Neither limit nor debar.
Join the hand of friend and stranger;
Join the hands of age and youth;
Join the faithful and the doubter
In their common search for truth.

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Prayers

Loving and All-Knowing God, we bring our praises to you because you are the creator of all things. When we look up and see the multitude of stars that you brought into being, when we think about the variety of life-forms that our planet sustains, when we consider that each one of us, your children, is an individual, with his own DNA, her own personality, then we are filled with awe at your creativity and ingenuity. But this awe is nothing compared to the sense of wonder that we feel when we reflect on your love for each one of us. You, the power behind all things, know each one of us by name and considers us to be precious in your sight.

We bring our praises to you for Jesus; for his readiness to enter into all that life in this world means to us, that we, by your grace, might share all that heaven is in him. We praise you for the way Jesus worked with and walked with people as they journeyed towards you. And we praise you that today, through the power of your Spirit, we continue to receive the support and guidance we need as we too try to walk with Jesus, as we journey towards you.

Loving and All-Knowing God, as we come before you to acknowledge your greatness and your goodness to us, we are very much aware of our shortcomings; of our inadequate and half-hearted response to your unfailing love and grace. We ask forgiveness for the times when we have used the free-will with which you have blessed us to please ourselves and not you, to live for our own ends and not yours and to spoil our relationship with you and with each other. We ask for forgiveness for the times when we have deemed that someone else is unworthy of your love; and for the times we have been certain that you could not possibly love us.

May each one of us know that our sins are forgiven, through Jesus Christ, our Saviour, and rejoice in his goodness and grace. **Amen.**

Reading: Isaiah 43:1-7

But now, this is what the Lord says – he who created you, Jacob, he who formed you, Israel: ‘Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have summoned you by name; you are mine. When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and when you pass through the rivers, they will not sweep over you. When you walk through the fire, you will not be burned; the flames will not set you ablaze.

For I am the Lord your God, the Holy One of Israel, your Saviour; I give Egypt for your ransom, Cush and Seba in your stead. Since you are precious and honoured in my sight, and because I love you, I will give people in exchange for you, nations in exchange for your life.

Do not be afraid, for I am with you; I will bring your children from the east and gather you from the west. I will say to the north, “Give them up!” and to the south, “Do not hold them back.” Bring my sons from afar and my daughters from the ends of the earth – everyone who is called by my name, whom I created for my glory, whom I formed and made.’

StF 394 – Spirit of God, unseen as the wind

<i>Ch) Spirit of God, unseen as the wind, Gentle as is the dove, Teach us the truth and help us believe Show us the Saviour's love.</i>	1) You spoke to us, long, long ago, Gave us the written word; We read it still, needing its truth, Through it Your voice is heard.	2) Without Your help, we fail our Lord, We cannot live his way, We need Your power, we need Your strength, Following Christ each day.
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Reading: Acts 8:14-17

When the apostles in Jerusalem heard that Samaria had accepted the word of God, they sent Peter and John to Samaria. When they arrived, they prayed for the new believers there that they might receive the Holy Spirit, because the Holy Spirit had not yet come on any of them; they had simply been baptised in the name of the Lord Jesus. Then Peter and John placed their hands on them, and they received the Holy Spirit.

Reading: Luke 3:15-17, 21-22

The people were waiting expectantly and were all wondering in their hearts if John might possibly be the Messiah. John answered them all, ‘I baptise you with water. But one who is more powerful than I will come, the straps of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie. He will baptise you with the Holy Spirit and fire. His winnowing fork is in his hand to clear his threshing-floor and to gather the wheat into his barn, but he will burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire.’ When all the people were being baptised, Jesus was baptised too. And as he was praying, heaven was opened and the Holy Spirit descended on him in bodily form like a dove. And a voice came from heaven: ‘You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased.’

StF 233 – When Jesus came to Jordan

1) When Jesus came to Jordan To be baptized by John, He did not come for pardon, But as his Father's Son. He came to share repentance With all who mourn their sins, To speak the vital sentence With which good news begins.	2) He came to share temptation, Our utmost woe and loss, For us and our salvation To die upon the cross. So when the Dove descended On him, the Son of Man, The hidden years had ended, The age of grace began.	3) Come, Holy Spirit, aid us To keep the vows we make; This very day invade us, And every bondage break. Come, give our lives direction, The gift we covet most: To share the resurrection That leads to Pentecost.
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Reflections

I wonder how many of you, like me, recently enjoyed that great Christmas tradition of watching Eric Morecambe grab Andre Previn by the lapels, and explain that he “was playing all the right notes, but not necessarily in the right order”. The sketch was 50 years old this Christmas; I guess that officially makes it ‘comedy gold’. I grew up in Morecambe, in the 1970s and 80s, at the height of Morecambe and Wise’s TV success, and I can tell you that we were very proud of our local hero. We still are in fact - his statue has a prime position on the prom, and both a local care home and, somewhat inevitably these days, the town’s branch of ‘Weatherspoons’ are named in his honour. And the generally held view was that Eric was the one with the lion’s share of the talent – although not by Eric himself. According to his son, as the credits rolled on a ‘Christmas Special’, Eric would always remark, “I thought Ernie was really good.” Both Eric and Ernie recognised each other’s strengths and enabled each other to play to those strengths so that, together, they could achieve their aim: of simply making people laugh. So why am I talking about Morecambe and Wise? Or, to put it another way, what do you think of the sermon so far? Rubbish?!

I have picked them as an example of how successful and effective relationships can be when there is mutual commitment and support - simply as an illustration of how goals can be achieved when people recognise and value each other, encourage and enable each other. Because, at the heart of Christian discipleship, and Church life, is the need for effective relationships. If we want to play our part in the coming of the kingdom of God then we can’t do that alone, we will need to invest in relationships - our relationships with our companions on our Christian journey, with the wider community, and of course our relationship with God. Our reading from Luke’s gospel illustrates wonderfully, and in three different ways, how, right from the beginning of his ministry, Jesus sought to build such relationships.

Firstly, there is the relationship between Jesus and John. By this point in Luke’s gospel, John’s God-given credentials and purpose are already well established: he will prepare the way for the Lord. To this end John has carved out a ‘no-nonsense’ ministry – a challenging call to repentance and baptism for the forgiveness of sins; a ministry which drew crowds and was successful, in its own right, in turning people back to God. And this is where Jesus chooses to begin his ministry - and in doing so Jesus affirms John’s work and all that it has achieved. I love how Luke paints us a picture of the dynamics of their relationship – that John is able to look beyond his own ministry and see the bigger picture, and that Jesus recognises and values the foundations that have been laid for the work ahead of him. There is no hint of resentfulness or commandeering behaviour; the total commitment that each of them had - to bringing people to God - put them above all of that.

Do our working relationships, particularly in the life of the church, reflect anything of the relationship between John and Jesus? Not always as much as they should. If I’m honest, church is the place where I can most easily get either defensive of or pushy about ‘my’ projects and ideas, without always considering the bigger picture, and how we might achieve it together. Perhaps it’s just me; and whilst I recognise that this stems from my deep investment, more often than not, it isn’t helpful. Thankfully though, that’s not always the case, and I also have a more positive testimony to offer. Ten years ago I was running ‘Messy Church’ at my own church, and a young mum who lived locally brought her daughter along to see what it was all about. Little did either of us know what God had in store.....she is now our circuit’s children and families worker, Claire. So, these days, we often team up, along with others, pooling our energy and experience, enabling and encouraging each other, working on that ‘bigger picture’ together.

Then there is the relationship between Jesus and the people who were also being baptised. These people were marking a new beginning - their commitment to turn back to God – by publicly submitting to John’s baptism of repentance for forgiveness of sins. And so, Jesus, in support of their decision, and to demonstrate his solidarity with them, also undertakes to be baptized. As God’s people journeyed towards God, Jesus joined them on that journey, and in doing so he was saying to the people ‘you don’t have to do this on your own. We’re in this together.’ And in the reading from Acts we hear how the apostles rushed to Samaria – a place, a people, that in the not too distant past they would have wanted little to do with - to support and enable new Christians as they began their Christian journeys.

We have a children's club at our church which we call 'Wayfarers' – the name means "people who walk a path together", chosen as a reminder that we don't need to walk along life's path alone. Sometimes in our journey of faith we need the support of others – when I was without a tutor and struggling to finish my local preachers training, Martin Rider, a fellow local preacher, walked with me, even though he was long since qualified himself. Sometimes we need to support others in their journey of faith. A few years ago, 30 years after I was confirmed into membership of the Methodist church, I went again to membership classes when someone asked me to go with them for moral support. And, as so often happens when you think you're doing someone a favour, it turned out that I was being given one; we grew in faith together and it brought me closer to God. Which echoes Jesus' experience when he joined the people being baptised ...

But the third relationship, that is so evident in our Gospel reading today, is that between Jesus and God. Jesus has affirmed John and encouraged God's people and now it is his turn to be affirmed and encouraged. Jesus not only receives the Holy Spirit to enable and empower him in the years to come; he also receives assurance that God has claimed him as his own, that he is loved and precious in God's sight and that God is very pleased with the commitment that Jesus has clearly made to play his part in bringing God's people back into relationship with him. From that moment on everything that Jesus does he does in the name of the Father and the power of the Spirit. It is a powerfully effective relationship; God equips Jesus not just through the power of the Spirit but also through the power that can be found in knowing that you are loved and valued. Love is a very powerful thing.

That relationship is one that is available to each of us. In the reading from Isaiah we heard God's message to the people: 'I have called you by name, you are mine...you are precious in my sight....and I love you.' We are God's people today; God has called each of us by name, we are precious in his sight and God loves each one of us. God doesn't promise us that his love will protect us from difficult times – we may pass through deep waters, we may have to walk through fire – but God promises to go through it with us, and to sustain us. Are we, as followers of Christ, ready and willing to commit to being in an effective relationship with God, to accept both the privilege and responsibility of being God's beloved children?

In this New Year, when it's traditional to invest time and energy in fitness drives and healthy eating regimes, our readings today encourage us to invest our time and energy into making sure that our relationships with God and with each other are fit and healthy. As two people famously used to sing, "in this world where we live, there should be more happiness", I believe that God longs for us, his children, to know joy and fulfilment. And that faith and love are the keys which will unlock that "brand new bright tomorrow" that Jesus called the coming of the kingdom of God.

StF 608 – All praise to our redeeming Lord

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| 1) All praise to our redeeming Lord,
Who joins us by his grace,
And bids us, each to each restored,
Together seek his face. | 4) Ev'n now we think and speak the same,
And cordially agree;
Concentred all, through Jesu's name,
In perfect harmony. |
| 2) He bids us build each other up;
And, gathered into one,
To our high calling's glorious hope
We hand in hand go on. | 5) We all partake the joy of one,
The common peace we feel,
A peace to sensual minds unknown,
A joy unspeakable. |
| 3) The gift which he on one bestows,
We all delight to prove;
The grace through every vessel flows,
In purest streams of love. | 6) And if our fellowship below
In Jesus be so sweet,
What heights of rapture shall we know
When round his throne we meet! |

Charles Wesley CCL No. 515642

Prayers

Loving and Faithful God, we offer our thanks that you are always ready and willing to have a mutually loving relationship with each and every one of your children. We offer our thanks that, through the effective relationships that Jesus made with people from all walks of life, we are able to learn about how to build each other up and help each other to be the people you call us to be. We thank you for the people who have supported us and walked with us in our journey of faith. And we thank you for the strength and inspiration we receive from your Spirit as we face the joys and sorrows of life and the privilege and responsibility of Christian living. **Amen.**

And so we bring our prayers for God's world and all God's people.

Concerned and Caring God, we pray for effective relationships in the church – in this church family and circuit, and in the church throughout the world..... [*Silence*]

L: This is our prayer **R: Help us to know and do your will**

We pray for effective relationships between the people and the leaders of different faiths, that the common ground we share as faithful, spiritual people of God might be helpful in combating those who would distort and abuse religion to satisfy their own destructive agendas..... [*Silence*]

L: This is our prayer **R: Help us to know and do your will**

We pray for effective relationships between people of power and influence in our nation and across the world. We pray particularly at this time for the working relationship between our government and our scientific advisers, that they together reach the decisions that will best navigate us through this current phase of the pandemic..... [*Silence*]

L: This is our prayer **R: Help us to know and do your will**

We pray for people who are struggling to cope with difficult relationships or relationships that have broken down completely. We pray that people with broken hearts and shattered lives might know something of your love as they struggle through dark times, that they might know healing and even reconciliation..... [*Silence*]

L: This is our prayer **R: Help us to know and do your will**

We pray for people who feel like they are walking through deep waters or passing through fire, with the challenges that life is throwing at them. We pray for people with health concerns and those who care for them, for the bereaved, for the anxious and isolated. May people in desperate situations know that you are with them and may this help them not to be overwhelmed by all they have to face. [*Silence*]

L: This is our prayer **R: Help us to know and do your will**

We pray for ourselves that we commit ourselves to seeking effective relationships with you, with the people with whom we live and work and with the people you call us to serve. [*Silence*]

L: This is our prayer **R: Help us to know and do your will**

We offer these prayers in the name of Jesus, who through his life, death and resurrection, offers each of us and those for whom we have prayed a loving relationship with God. **Amen.**

The Lord's Prayer

Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name; thy kingdom come; thy will be done; on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread. And forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us. And lead us not into temptation; but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom, the power, and the glory for ever and ever. **Amen.**

Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name, your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as in heaven. Give us today our daily bread. Forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us. Save us from the time of trial and deliver us from evil. For the kingdom, the power, and the glory are yours now and for ever. **Amen.**

StF 611 – Brother, sister, let me serve you

- 1) Brother, sister let me serve you
Let me be as Christ to you;
Pray that I may have the grace
To let you be my servant, too.
- 2) We are pilgrims on a journey,
And companions on the road;
We are here to help each other
Walk the mile and bear the load.
- 3) I will hold the Christ light for you
In the night-time of your fear;
I will hold my hand out to you,
Speak the peace you long to hear.
- 4) I will weep when you are weeping,
When you laugh I'll laugh with you;
I will share your joy and sorrow
Till we've seen this journey through.
- 5) When we sing to God in heaven
We shall find such harmony,
Born of all we've known together
Of Christ's love and agony.
- 6) Brother, sister let me serve you
Let me be as Christ to you;
Pray that I may have the grace
To let you be my servant, too.

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Blessing

As we walk life's path, may we, like Jesus, commit ourselves to being in relationship with the God who loves us and dedicate our lives to serving him, in the power of the Holy Spirit. And may we each know the blessing of God: Parent, Saviour and Counsellor. **Amen.**