

Sermon for Epiphany 1, Year B, Grenoble

Readings; Acts 19 v1-7 and Mark 1 v4-11

Title: New beginnings.

Part 1: setting the scene. Where we have been and where we are going.

We have to take a bit of a leap in our thinking this week. For a couple of weeks now we have been thinking of Baby Jesus, meek and mild; a helpless infant.

We have heard re-told, the wonderful stories of Jesus conception and birth; of angels and shepherds and stables and innkeepers with their no vacancy signs; and Mary and Joseph flung into parenthood far away from home.

On the 28th of December we have Holy Innocents Day – when we recall that dreadful massacre of all boys under two years of age in Bethlehem because of the jealousy of King Herod; and the flight of Mary, Joseph and Jesus to Egypt where they lived as refugees until that king died.

Last Sunday we heard that, in the traditional Jewish way, Jesus was circumcised on the 8th day and officially given the name 'Jesus'.

Yesterday, we celebrated the Epiphany and in recognition of that we sang the carol 'We three kings' at the beginning of the service. And later, we will have the pleasure of sharing Epiphany cake (Galette des Rois) together.

And we recall how these strangers from the East, probably followers of the Zoroastrian faith, were prompted to follow a new star to find a new King; and bringing with them gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh.

We are still in the church season of Christmas which lasts until Candlemas is marked on the 2nd February but now today, we read of a Jesus who is thirty years old; the years of childhood now behind him and poised on the brink of his three years of ministry.

From a presumably quiet life in Nazareth, possibly working as a carpenter, Jesus has emerged from the safety of anonymity and has gone to the River Jordan to see his cousin John.

I don't know if you have an advent wreath here in St Marc's during Advent? The kind with five candles – one for each Sunday in Advent with a final one for Christmas Day?

On the Third Sunday of Advent we remember John the Baptist and how he prepared the people for the coming of Jesus. And now here he is again, making an appearance.

(John the Baptist's history and ministry)

Let's remind ourselves of John's background; the story is told at the beginning of Luke's gospel.

This is not a test; think of it as a quiz!

Who can remember the name of John the Baptist's parents? (Zechariah and Elizabeth)

What kind of age do you think they were? (elderly)

What was Zechariah's job? (priest in the temple of the Lord)

He and Elizabeth had prayed for a long time that they might have a baby but had probably given up hope by now.

While Zechariah was working in the temple, the Angel Gabriel appeared to him and told him that his prayers had been heard and that Elizabeth would have a baby boy.

There then followed more information about their son. He is to be called John. He will be a godly man and must not drink wine or strong drink. He will be filled with the Holy Spirit and will turn the people back towards God and get the people ready for the coming of the Messiah.

Zechariah was doubtful about this because he and Elizabeth were getting on a bit in age and because of his doubting, the Angel took away his ability to speak and told him he would be silent until after the baby was born.

And it was as the angel had said, Elizabeth became pregnant. Shortly before her baby was due, her relative Mary came to visit her, who was by now pregnant with Jesus and the two celebrated their situations and praised God for his goodness. (Do you remember that wonderful song of Mary that we can find in Luke's gospel, which we know as the Magnificat? My soul glorifies the Lord and my spirit rejoices in God my Saviour.....)

Then John was born and when it came to the time to circumcise and formerly name him, there was an assumption that he would be called Zechariah like his

father. But Zechariah wrote on a tablet that his name was to be John and at that moment he was able to speak again. Everyone was amazed and could see that John was destined for great things.

From when he grew up, John went to live in the desert and started preaching repentance to the people; warning them that needed to repent and be baptised before the one who was greater than him would arrive. “Turn away from your sins and be baptised and God will forgive your sins.”

As John’s ministry progressed people began to think that HE might be the Messiah but he told them they should expect someone else, someone much greater than him.

It was at this point that Jesus arrived by the Jordan. And it is a moment of truth for both of them.

Let’s just think about that encounter. Can you picture it in your mind? Two thirty year old men standing by the River Jordan surrounded by the many who had come to be baptised.

Do you think they already knew one another? They were related – some kind of cousins – so they may well have done. Their mothers were certainly friends.

If they didn’t know one another personally, they would probably haven known about them by reputation and each had an idea of their own role in the story.

John had confidently been telling people to repent and be baptized, but I wonder if he was hesitant about baptizing Jesus. John recognises the one for whom he has been preparing the people. He knew of Jesus’ importance so may well have been reluctant to submerge Jesus in the Jordan.

But once he had done it, he would have been reassured that he had done the right thing. He heard the voice from heaven saying to Jesus ‘You are my own dear Son, I am pleased with you’. John relaxes. Yes he was right. There was one coming who was greater than him and this is the one – his cousin Jesus. John’s work is done. He knew that it was time for **new beginnings**.

Jesus work is about to begin. Following on from his baptism, we read that the Holy Spirit sends him into the wilderness – on a retreat – so that he can spend time in self-examination and reflection and preparing himself for what is to come.

All his weaknesses and strengths are exposed, all possible paths are there for him to choose which way he will go; which way is the God of love's path for him?

Mark's gospel which is the one that the church is following through this church year, doesn't go into detail on the temptations (as Matthew does). We just hear that "he stayed in the desert for forty days being tempted by Satan".

Alone he would struggle with the thought of who he was and how he must carry out his life's mission. But he was not completely alone, because angels came and ministered to him; presumably keeping him safe and acting as wise counsellors to him.

When we think of the temptations of Jesus, we think of this wilderness time in particular. But there would have been many times when Jesus was tempted to forsake the way of love, set out for him by God.

The times when even his closest disciples didn't understand him, when the people around him just wanted miracles and signs instead of teaching and message, times when he is exhausted and people are being petty, nit-picking and critical.

Then, I'm sure he would have thought to himself that there must be easier ways to get people to listen him and to follow him. We hear of several occasions where he withdraws to pray, and presumably, angels minister to him again.

So, we have moved speedily from Jesus conception and birth to the brink of Jesus' ministry. What can we take away for ourselves today from what we have heard?

As we move on from the infant Jesus, picture once again in your mind's eye, the adult Jesus coming face to face with John on the shores of that great River.

And then see yourself, face to face with the one we have just heard God calling 'my son, my beloved'. You are standing there beside Jesus and you are aware of his calling and relationship to God.

How do you react to that? Just take a moment to think about it. *(Pause)*

Is the Jesus who stands before us the one that we have usually imagined in our mind?

Or does that reminder of God's words to him, make us see Jesus as more challenging, more powerful, more compelling, more loving than we sometimes think?

Jesus passes his mantle onto each one of us, his followers. We are Jesus' hands and feet in the world today. He says to us 'you are God's son, God's daughter, you are God's beloved'.

The start of a year can be a time of **new beginnings** and it is a good opportunity to take time to reflect on what has passed.

How are we doing, in living up to God's calling?

Do we need a fresh start in following the path he has set for us?

Maybe we need to take some wilderness time like Jesus did.

For if we are looking at renewing our commitment to following God's path, we must be aware that there will be times of temptation for us too. Times when we want to cut corners or abandon the path altogether.

As our realisation of who Jesus is, grows and each time we see him a bit more clearly, the Spirit of God compels us to examine our thoughts and ways of living to hold them against the example of the way of God's beloved Son.

Daily we will struggle with our own particular demons who know just when and where we are most vulnerable and can most easily be tempted. Only we ourselves and God know who our demons are. Whatever they are, if we take Jesus seriously, we work hard to avoid the situations where they are likely to lead us away from the path of love. And we too need to withdraw sometimes to spend time with God who knows us better than we know ourselves.

And something to bear in mind is that we can also be ministering angels to one another; offering comfort and wise counsel to those who are struggling.

Jesus came to bring God's good news. News that God promises we will never be cut off from him because of our weaknesses and failures. Never will he allow sin to destroy us completely. When we take those weaknesses to God and repent of the failures and tell him of our longing to know him better, then God will say to us "You are my son, my daughter, the beloved. In you I am well pleased."

In our wilderness times, in our days of self-examination and our sense of failure to live up even to our own standards, we can hear and respond to that good news of God's.

Repent and believe the good news. This is the way of eternal life.

At the beginning of the year, the Methodist church will often hold a Covenant Service where they celebrate all that God has done for them and reaffirm their lives and choices to God.

And so I invite you to commit yourself anew in the words of John Wesley's Covenant prayer. You should have sight of a copy of it?

It is not an easy prayer to say **and** to mean but do pray it if you feel you can.

And if in all conscience you cannot pray it today, take it home with you and stick it on the fridge or by your bed and give some thought and prayer to what stops you from making this commitment to God's service.

Let's pray:

I am no longer my own but yours.

Put me to what you will, rank me with whom you will.

Put me to doing, put me to suffering.

Let me be employed for you or laid aside for you, exalted for you or brought low for you.

Let me be full, let me be empty; let me have all things, let me have nothing.

I freely and wholeheartedly yield all things to your pleasure and disposal.

And now, glorious and blessed God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, you are mine and I am yours.

So the covenant now made on earth, let it be ratified in heaven.

Amen.