

THE BAPTISM OF CHRIST Mark 1:4-11 and Matthew 3:1-17:

No doubt many of us have been encouraged by some of the recent headlines describing the covid vaccines as *“the light at the end of the tunnel.”* As we have discovered in the last week, that tunnel can become elongated as we endure a further lock down, but the eventual outcome is in sight.

On this first Sunday of Epiphany, noted in the Church’s Calendar, as *“The Baptism of Christ”* we turn our attention to Jesus as he is baptised by John the Baptist at the start of his public ministry on earth.

Isaiah had looked far into the future when he had prophesied *“A voice of one calling in the desert prepare the way for the Lord.”*(Isaiah 40:3). The light at the end of that tunnel would take place some 700 years later at the time of John the Baptist’s ministry.

We know from Mark 1:5 *that the whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem went out to him.* They came in their droves. In Matthew 3:11 he told the crowd *“I baptise you with water for repentance. But after me will come one who is more powerful than I, whose sandals I am not fit to carry. He will baptise you with the Holy Spirit and with fire.”* No doubt you remember the way in which John protested when Jesus asked to be baptised by him. *“I ought to be baptised by you”* he said. What emotions must have been running through John as he stood in the river Jordan. Firmly convinced that he was completely unworthy compared with the Son of God, he now found himself baptising Jesus. It must have been an outstanding moment for him in his ministry and the pinnacle of his message to the people. The One had come for whom the world had so long awaited and had come to him for baptism. This in itself presented a problem. John’s ministry of baptism was one of repentance. People first had to repent of their sins and then they were baptised with water as a sign of forgiveness. Jesus, the sinless Son of God had nothing for which he needed to repent. No wonder that John had first protested at the idea of baptising him, but there were important reasons why it had to happen.

First of all it was reassurance for John. He had been tireless in his message of repentance and insistence that the Kingdom of God was near. As Matthew said in his Gospel chapter 3:3 John was the man the prophet Isaiah was talking about when he said *“I will send my messenger ahead of you, to prepare your way... a voice of one calling in the desert, prepare the way for the Lord, make straight paths for him.”* Now the Lord had appeared to him, John, in person.

Secondly it was the time of a new beginning. Jesus’ earthly ministry was to start. Apart from the period surrounding his birth and the episode when as a young boy his parents found him in the Temple speaking with the Jewish Teachers, nothing more is heard of him until this moment.

Thirdly, although sinless himself, he wanted to identify with ordinary people, those trapped in their sin whom he had come to save. He knew that his ministry would end on the cross when he himself would take on the sins of the world and through his death and resurrection reconcile us to God.

Fourthly It was a time of showing the world that this was in accordance with God’s will. It was a time when he was publicly identified as the Son of God. The climax came immediately after John had baptised Jesus. We read in Mark 1:10-11 *“And a voice came from heaven: You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased.”* The dove was a symbol of purity and gentleness.

In a very visible and dramatic way there was this confirmation that Jesus was set aside for a very special ministry. There was confirmation of the very closeness of Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

John had baptised with water but now Jesus baptises with the fire of the Holy Spirit coming into believers' lives. It is this teaching that we ourselves must always hold on to.

When John the Baptist preached he told people to repent, turning away from all that was wrong in their lives. We have this wonderful assurance that Jesus came in order that we might be forgiven whenever we turn to him in repentance. We know that he is always with us and that we have the power of the Holy Spirit within us. May we always give thanks to God for the light of Christ within our lives.