

Isaiah 43:1-7; Luke 3:15-17, 21-22

*Baptised into love and prayer*

So the Christmas tree has gone and the decorations stored away and the wise men have departed and are on their way home. And now our Bible readings leapfrog us forward to the event that really launches the beginning of Jesus' public ministry, his baptism by John the Baptist in the River Jordan. We are not entirely sure of the nature of John's baptism. At that time there were various groups in Israel who practiced some form of baptism, with different meanings and emphases, but John's baptism seems to have been bound up with a sense that God was about to do something new in the life of God's people. There was a sense that the life of the nation had come to a dead end under occupation by the Romans and that God was breaking in and making a fresh start. A new movement was under way, centred on this one who had now come and who would bring God's judgement upon the nation, sifting the wheat and burning the chaff. And people were invited to join up, to become a part of this initiative that would make a new beginning for Israel and that indeed would likely usher in the end of the world. And baptism was the means of recruitment. This was how you signed on.

And Jesus begins his ministry by undergoing John's baptism. He is the one who John has spoken of, the one through whom God is doing this new thing, but that does not prevent him from being baptised by John, identifying with his movement. In fact, Jesus will deviate significantly from John. His ministry will differ profoundly from what John expected and predicted, such that John will come to doubt if Jesus is the promised one after all. But Jesus submits to John nevertheless and so there follows this account of him being baptised. And we are told of the heavens opening – and we are told of two things which come out of heaven, two things that I want to focus on this morning.

The first is the voice, the voice which declares, 'You are my Son, the Beloved, with you I am well pleased.' And this voice establishes Jesus' identity. It tells him who he is. It tells him that he is the beloved, the one in whom God delights and that is something that Jesus needs to know. After all, in his coming ministry he is going to face all kinds of opposition and hostility. He will be hounded by his enemies. He will be spied upon and scrutinised. The full

weight of the religious and political establishment will be targeted against him and he will receive little support from his followers and disciples. So what is going to sustain Jesus? What is going to give him poise and buoyancy when the weight of the world is dragging him down? Jesus is going to need a strong sense of his own identity when it is being questioned and challenged by those who wish him harm. He's going to need to be centred and secure in himself, so what will nerve him and hold him steady? Well, it will be the knowledge that he is the beloved, the object of God's delight. It's that voice from heaven claiming him, affirming him, giving him the deep sense of being loved by God, of being baptised into divine love.

There is, however, something very interesting that we need to note here in Luke's account of this incident. In the other Gospels, in Matthew and Mark, we are told that it is as Jesus is coming up out of the water that the Spirit of God descends upon him and he hears the voice proclaiming that he is beloved. As he rises from the river the Spirit descends like a dove and the voice sounds. Here in Luke, however, it is different. We are told in fact that 'when Jesus also had been baptised and was praying, the heavens opened and the Holy Spirit descended upon him... And a voice came from heaven, 'you are my Son, the Beloved, with you I am well pleased.' Note that! Luke tells us that it was as Jesus was praying that he heard the voice and the Spirit descended. In fact Luke really isn't that interested in Jesus' baptism at all. There is no description of Jesus going into the water or coming up out of it. There isn't even any mention of John doing it. All the action takes place while Jesus is praying. That's the focus of attention. Why?

Well, for a start this is consistent with Luke's interest in Jesus' prayer life. Luke more than any other gospel profiles the place of prayer in Jesus' life – there are frequent references in his Gospel to Jesus withdrawing to deserted places to pray, to going up mountains to pray, to spending the night in prayer. Prayer runs like a thread through Luke's presentation of Jesus. And it's very typical of Luke's Jesus that no sooner is he baptised and out of the river than he's on his knees praying. It comes naturally and spontaneously to him. But furthermore I'm sure it is significant that it is in the context of Jesus' praying that he hears the voice telling him that he is beloved and delightful to God. It's when he's on his knees that Jesus hears that glorious affirmation. Jesus, after all, is not praying into a vacuum. He is not flinging words against an empty sky in the hope that something might stick. No - in his moments of prayer Jesus is

held in God's strong embrace and drawn deeper into God's love. And that is why he needs to pray. That is why it is such a feature of his ministry. In all the ups and downs of his ministry, in all the trials and hostility that he faces, in every challenge to his identity he needs to return to that embrace. He needs to return to that place where he hears the voice, 'you are beloved; I delight in you. They may call you a blasphemer. They may call you a terrorist. They may call you mad. But you are the beloved.' And the place that he hears that is on his knees – in the desert place or on the mountain or in the night, but always on his knees - and that is as true for us as it was for him.

This brings us to the second thing in this passage that comes out of heaven. There is a voice, but that is followed by the Holy Spirit that descends on Jesus like a dove. But note something interesting. Note that just as with the voice, it was when Jesus was praying that the Holy Spirit descended upon him. So Jesus prays – and then God's Spirit comes. Now, that's not what you might expect. You might expect it to be the other way around. You might expect the Spirit to come and then for Jesus to be driven to his knees in prayer. You might expect the Spirit to be the one that inspires and leads him to pray. And indeed that is true and there is a whole theology of prayer in the Bible that suggests that we pray at the Spirit's prompting. But that is only one side of the story. Yes, God's Spirit prompts and leads us in prayer, but in praying we make ourselves receptive and open for God to come to us. In praying we open up a space which God fills as God's Spirit is released into us and through us. We give ourselves to God, and God gives himself to us in a two-way tango.

So let's return to those verses and picture the scene. Jesus joins all those flocking out into the wilderness – one more anonymous face in the crowd - and there he is baptised. And there follows immediately one distinguishing feature of his life, one thing that stands out, his communion with God in prayer. And as he prays the heavens are opened. God here is breaking open the world, cracking it open and penetrating it so that it is not closed and shut off from God. Centuries before the prophet Isaiah had cried out to God in a moment of despair, 'would that you would tear open the heavens and come down' for the world seemed bereft of God and abandoned. But now God tears it open, releasing the Holy Spirit and suddenly the world is opened up and people's lives are opened to God in a new way. The great reformer Martin Luther used to describe sin as being turned in upon yourself – *incurvatus in se* for the Latin scholars among you. A sinful world is locked in on itself, with people turned in

on themselves. And now God comes to prise it open and to invade it and to pour love and grace into it.

And it all comes to a focus in prayer. As we clasp our hands in prayer, as we kneel, we create a space open to God, and we hear that voice whispering to us that we are loved and prized and treasured. But there is more than just a voice. Along with speaking God gives Godself as something of God enters us. Think of it as a dove, gentle and peaceful. Think of it as a flame, fiery and fierce coming to purge the chaff in our lives. But in prayer God's Spirit mingles with our spirit, God's breath with our breath, and God is at work in us. And prayer opens us up to more of that Holy Spirit, that dove, that flame. And as our lives are opened up to God so they are opened up to others. And by God's grace we maybe even find ourselves becoming more loving, more patient, more passionate for justice, more compassionate.

I wonder how your prayer life is. I was saying to someone this week, it's very rare that people say to me that their prayer life is good. When people talk of prayer they often seem to see it as a problem, something they wish they could do better. So, let me mention two things. For the past few weeks we have been having a prayer time before this service, from 10 pm. It's been in the Deaconry Room but I'm changing it slightly so that it's outside the Deaconry Room, just here beside the pulpit, in this corner. It's not a prayer meeting – it's a prayer place, a prayer space. Why not come and join us before the service begins, even for just a few minutes? There's a list of prayer needs and the prayer is mainly silent. Just come and go, even for a few moments, and let the Spirit come.

Secondly, we will soon be starting a series on prayer in the midweek fellowship at the manse, running fortnightly. Read about it in the notices. It begins a week on Wednesday and will run through Lent. Why not join us and see if maybe together we can help strengthen our prayer life?

You, like Jesus, are the Beloved. God treasures you, delights in you. Hallelujah! But that is an invitation to you to communion with God, to prayer. It's an invitation to that divine choreography in which our spirits open to God and heaven opens to us and God's Spirit comes to us. This was the hallmark of Jesus life. Should it not also be of ours? Amen.

O holy and gracious God,  
revealed to us in Jesus of Nazareth,  
we worship you this day and bless your holy name.  
We praise you for the love that has created us,  
shaped us and formed us,  
the love that declares us to be your beloved in whom you delight,  
the love that goes with us through the waters of distress  
and the fires of danger and fear.  
And we praise you for the gift of your Holy Spirit  
by which we are promoted and called,  
and led and empowered.  
By that same Spirit we praise you,  
lifting up our hearts and spirits in worship  
to give glory to your name.  
Have mercy we pray and forgive us for our sins.  
Forgive us that we do not live as the Beloved of God.  
Forgive us that there is much in us in which you take no delight.

Loving God,  
open the heavens and send your Holy Spirit

upon us afresh.

Baptise us with love and grace and forgiveness - ]  
and with the power to change and to rise to new life.

We pray in Jesus' name and we pray in the words  
Jesus taught us, saying...

O God, prise open the heavens and send your Spirit  
to our needy world.

Come, Holy Spirit as fire to purge us;  
come and burn the chaff of all that has no place in our world...

And come, Holy Spirit, as a dove,  
gentle envoy of peace...

We pray for any today who need to know that they  
are your beloved, that you, their Maker, takes delight in them.

We pray for those struggling with addiction,  
we pray for those fearful of a medical diagnosis,  
we pray for those walking through the dark valley of depression,  
we pray for those entangled in violent relationships,

We pray for children who are abused and who grow up to  
hate themselves,

we pray for those who cannot be at peace with their sexuality  
or with their gender,

we pray for those tempted to self-harm,  
we pray for all for whom the world is a hard and heartless place.

O God baptise us with love.  
Make the world a more gracious and peaceful place.

And we pray for your church  
That it may indeed be the place where earth is open to heaven,  
open in worship and praise,  
open in prayer.

Grant that your church may be the place  
where lives are open to God in joyful obedience,  
and where we learn to be open to one another,  
sharing one another's joys and burdens  
and where all are affirmed as God's beloved.

O God baptise your church with your Holy Spirit  
and empower us for witness and mission.

Hear these prayers we pray in the name of Jesus  
The anointed one, the Messiah, the Christ. Amen.