

Reflection from Michael Harris, Methodist Local Preacher and good friend of Fillongley Church

The Baptism of Christ: The Place, the Man, the Word

There are some towns and cities in our country that are identified for all the world by the rivers on which they stand. We talk of Stoke-on-Trent, Newcastle-on-Tyne and nearer at home, Stratford-on-Avon. The same however cannot be said of Coventry and one might ask how many of us can actually give the name of the river on which Coventry stands. It is in fact the Sherbourne, ironically meaning “the clear stream,” that in fact flows mostly through culverts underground through the city centre streets, undistinguished and little regarded.

We can compare it in many ways with the River Jordan, the stream that flows from Galilee to the Dead Sea, short, narrow and for many centuries rather dirty and in late years somewhat polluted. Yet it figures in our hymns and religious songs and we sing “When I tread the verge of Jordan,” “Roll, Jordan, roll,” and so on, For it was here on its banks there took place one of the great moments in the life of Jesus – the moment when after 30 years working as a jobbing builder in Nazareth, he is baptised by John and hears the voice of God himself: “You are my Son, my beloved, with whom I am well pleased.”

The experience of a lifetime: and today, as we celebrate that event we must ask, “what does it say to us? How can “the heavens open” for us?”

Three important conditions were necessary for the Baptism of Jesus.

The first is the PLACE. “On Jordan’s Bank”

In all our lives there are places of great significance, and for many these are places that offer the prospect of real spiritual experience.

For example, in the Old Testament there were the Oaks of Mamre where Abraham met the three angels who changed his life, the Burning Bush where Moses heard the voice of God, and for Isaiah the Temple where he saw the splendour of the Almighty and was called to be a prophet. For Jesus there was the Wilderness of Judaea where he overcame the Temptations and set out on the ministry that God had chosen for him, or the hills of Galilee where he loved to roam, seek peace and pray.

My holy places have been varied over my long life and I think of standing on the Areopagus in Athens where St, Paul himself stood and preached to the cynical philosophers of that city, or the church in Assisi founded by St. Francis, or the tiny church at Little Gidding which my wife Ruth and I visited many times to share in peaceful prayer and meditation.

Have you got a Holy Place? A place that offers you food for your daily life, spiritual comfort and strength? If so then return to it regularly in our hearts and you will be refreshed.

THE PERSON: “John the Baptist appeared . . .”

John was the man who helped set the ministry of Jesus alight. This austere, dirty, uncompromising man for what you saw in John was what you got.

But he was the one whom God used to prepare the way for Jesus – and how many of us owe our commitment to our Lord to the influence of another? Ask all those you know how they came to be Christians and many will reply, “Because of so-and-so.” In my own case I can recall my Sunday School and Youth Club leader, Will Turner, my lovely Grandmother, and several others who showed me in their lives Jesus their Lord and helped me find him

And all these people would, like John, declare that they were nothing special.

“I am NOT . . .” was the reply to those who asked John if he was the Messiah or the prophet Elijah. He was a voice crying in the wilderness “Make straight the way of the Lord.”

Do you have someone in your life who sparked your faith in and love of Jesus? If so remember him/her with joy and gratitude and ask God to help you to do the same for others.

THE WORD: "John the Baptist appeared in the Wilderness preaching . . ."

Along came this man John, a man with a message, and we are reminded of the importance not only of lives, but of words. We think of the prophets and their constant cry of "Thus saith the Lord". Let us remember that Jesus began his ministry as a preacher: "Jesus came into Galilee, preaching the Gospel of God, and saying, "The kingdom of God is at hand: repent and believe in the gospel." And from his ministry of preaching developed the Church's great task of proclamation, beginning with Peter at Pentecost, and passing on from Paul through the centuries. And I make no apology for claiming that the Methodist tradition from which I am descended is one of communicating our faith through preaching and above all our hymns; that is through words.

I recently saw a film of the England v Germany World Cup game in 1990. Paul Gascoigne, then the English hero, was booked for the second time and would therefore miss the Final. As he fell to the ground weeping, Gary Lineker, the captain, can be seen on the film saying to the England manager Bobby Robson: "Have a word." - A word – it can be vital.

Have the words of Jesus touched you? Do they still have the power to move you?

Do we have a word for our generation?

Conclusion: A Place, a Person, a Word – but another element in the events of the Baptism of Jesus was present and essential – The Holy Spirit of God himself.

It was the Holy Spirit who spoke those tremendous words of Confirmation to Jesus that He was indeed the One who was to bring God's message of Love and Power to the world through his life, preaching, caring, suffering and ultimate victory. "You are my beloved Son. With you I am well pleased."

So, just as we recognise the significance of places, people and words in our Christian lives, let us never forget that it is only through the presence of the Holy Spirit in those places, those people and those words that the will of God can be done.

AMEN