

Baptism of Christ 2021: Who do we think we are?

John the baptizer appeared in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. And people from the whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem were going out to him, and were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins. Now John was clothed with camel's hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey. He proclaimed, "The one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to stoop down and untie the thong of his sandals. I have baptized you with water; but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit."

In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. And just as he was coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on him. And a voice came from heaven, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased."

Mark 1:4-11

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I wonder how many of you watch the television programme, 'Who do you think you are'?

It's been running for a number of years now. In each episode a well-known person is invited to trace their family history. The programme follows them as they journey back in time, uncovering parts of their ancestry and family history about which they knew little or nothing.

For many, it turns out to be quite an emotional journey as they discover their roots. And, in making this journey, they get a renewed and deepened sense of their own identity, and the life stories that have shaped their own history and contributed to making them the person they are today.

In the same way the baptism of Jesus is also about journey and identity.

At the start of his public ministry, Jesus journeys to the river Jordan, a place of profound meaning for the people of Israel.

The river runs north to south across Israel and Palestine, from above the Sea of Galilee, then from the southern end of the Sea of Galilee all the way down to the Dead Sea. It is a key natural landmark and barrier.

In the conquest of Canaan, the Jordan was the last obstacle to be overcome before the Israelites entered the Promised Land and took the city of Jericho. At other moments in history the river provided a strong line of defence against Israel's enemies.

The river was also a place of miracles. For example, when the Syrian Naaman comes to the Prophet Elisha seeking healing for his leprosy, Elisha tells him to bathe seven times in the Jordan. Reluctantly Naaman does so, and the leprosy is healed.

To go to the Jordan, then, was not simply to visit a river, but to travel to a place deeply associated with history, with healing, and with the people of Israel inheriting a land of their own. It was a place associated with God's promise and God's presence.

In coming to the Jordan, Jesus was identifying himself with the whole story of Israel: the entry into the Promised Land, struggling with enemies, the search for renewal and healing.

At the start of Jesus' public ministry, the question 'who do you think you are' is being answered in the most radical way. Who is Jesus? – his baptism tells us that Jesus identifies himself fully with the story of humanity as focused in the story of Israel, and the voice from heaven saying 'this is my beloved' tells us that Jesus is also identified fully with the presence of God.

In other words, Jesus is the one in whom God and humanity, heaven and earth, meet and are made one.

In response, the question for us is this: Do we also want to identify ourselves with this story, this account of how things really are? In the light of the Gospel story, who do we think we are?

As, in his baptism, Jesus identified with Israel's story, so Christian baptism identifies us with Jesus' story and what we believe he has done for us, opening wide the door between heaven and earth.

Amongst all the different stories and experiences that have shaped us, we are reminded again this morning that our deepest identity is to be found in knowing that, in Christ, we are God's beloved children and belong to him for ever.

Do you remember a few years ago now, when the Archbishop of Canterbury, discovered, through DNA testing, that his biological father was Sir Winston Churchill's last private secretary, Sir Anthony Montague Browne. Talk about 'who do you think you are' and family history. In response, Archbishop Justin gave an honest and faith-filled response. He said:

As a result of my parents' addictions my early life was messy, although I had the blessing and gift of a wonderful education, and was cared for deeply by my grandmother, my mother once she was in recovery, and my father (Gavin Welby) as far as he was able.

Then he added this: *"I know that I find who I am in Jesus Christ, not in genetics, and my identity in him never changes..."*

Our identity in Christ never changes. However we may mess up, whatever the ups and downs of our lives, however far away we may feel from God, or God from us, we are God's beloved children.

For in Christ, God plunged into the messiness and uncertainty of human life to draw us into the life of his kingdom and to overcome all that would separate us from him. That is the meaning of Christ's baptism and the good news that we proclaim.

Rev Canon Andrew Braddock, Director of Mission & Ministry