

St Mary's, Dorchester, Sunday 9th March i.e. 1st Sunday of Lent.

Deuteronomy 26:1-11

Romans 10:8b-13

Luke 4:1-13

In the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Partly by design and partly by providence this church community has spent a lot of time recently reflecting on baptism. The part of it that's design is the way that the Church remembers Jesus' baptism as one of the first significant events of his ministry; we deliberately remember it close to the beginning of the Church's year. It's also by design that I have been asking parents if they would consider having their children baptised in our main Sunday service. I've been doing that for at least the last year, without much success to begin with. The part of it that's providence is that now, for the first time, so many of those parents are saying “yes” – yes, we are willing to participate in the normal worshipping life of our local Church. That gives you and me something new and exciting to reflect on as a church community.

So, by design and by providence baptism has been a recurring theme here over the last few months. Each of our Bible readings today invites us to reflect on what happens next.

Our reading from Deuteronomy describes the festival of First Fruits. God brought Israel through the waters of the Red Sea and of the Jordan, into the promised land. Every year the Israelites commemorated their new life after Egypt and the wilderness years. God had given them the land in all its abundance; and they discerned that they must respond with abundant gratitude towards God. The Apostle Paul, in our second reading, also describes how God's generosity [10:12] requires something from us. God's word is indeed near to us, “on [our] lips and in [our] heart[s]” [10:8]; and if that's true then it becomes natural for us to express our faith through action: we not only believe with our heart, but we also confess with our lips [10:10].

The events of our Gospel reading immediately follow Jesus' baptism by John. You'll remember that Jesus, at his baptism, powerfully experiences the love of his God and Father. He also knows in a new way that the Holy Spirit is active within him and alongside him. In Luke's Gospel, that we're reading from at the moment, it's clear that even before those experiences Jesus had a dawning sense of his relationship with God and his vocation [e.g. 2:49]. Now the Spirit gives him direction: driving him into the wilderness.

Jesus does not view his baptism, and the powerful emotions that were at play there, as an end in itself. Yes, he now has a clear sense of his Father's love for him; but, as Paul puts it in his letter to the Philippians, this is not something to be exploited [Phil. 2:6] – something to hold onto, an excuse to live a life of private contentment.

In the wilderness, Jesus famously has a chance to work out his sense of vocation in a new way. The devil presents Jesus with a series of choices. None of the objects of these choices are bad in themselves. Bread isn't a bad thing in itself, and we know that Jesus ate bread on a number of occasions. Worldly authority isn't a bad thing in itself – we know that Jesus was a famously authoritative person. And physical security isn't a bad thing in itself – Jesus deliberately avoided physical harm on a number of occasions, according to the Gospel writers [e.g. Luke 4:30]. What makes the difference here is that the devil is presenting these choices in the abstract. Jesus did not come to us to eat bread; he did not come to be a powerful leader; he did not come so that he could be safe. In the wilderness, Jesus has already chosen the way of self-denying love. From this point onwards he will carry on loving, even when that puts him into conflict with those who will not accept it. It is only a matter of time before he will find himself in Jerusalem.

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It isn't enough for the Israelites that God delivered them from Egypt and brought them into the promised land. Something more is required of them. Paul says that it isn't enough simply to know that God's word is near to us. Faith requires something more of us. It isn't enough that Jesus knows himself to be God's beloved Son. Divine love demands something more of him.

All of which draws us inexorably to the question of our own vocation. A large part of what we say and do in church is an attempt to teach people the things that Jesus discovers at his baptism. God loves every one of his creatures; and the Holy Spirit is close to all of us, waiting to give us whatever we need to grow into the people God made us to be.

But knowing these things in our heads is only the beginning. By God's grace, perhaps, that knowledge will become second nature to us, so we don't even need to think about it. And then finally we will be free to live out of God's love, and God's presence.

Living entirely out of God's love is the goal of our creaturely existence, our ultimate purpose. In the

meantime, that knowledge – the knowledge of God's love – requires something more of us. The Christian life is not a spectator sport; it is not entertainment; it is not a warm feeling of general affirmation. Christianity is something that we are called to participate in with all of our heart, our soul, our mind and our strength. No one can do our loving for us. To put it slightly differently, the Christian life is “practice”, in both senses of the word: a tennis player practises for a tournament; a GP picks up her stethoscope and goes about her practice. In the same ways we practise Christianity: we “practise” so that when it matters we can do it right; and at the same time our faith is our “practice”, because the time when it really matters is always now.

By tradition Lent is a great time to think about our Christian practice. Maybe you've already given something up for Lent, or taken something on. Please consider carefully which of the weekly Lent activities and Holy Week events you can make it to. If you don't know what's involved, ask someone. Some of those events allow you to sit and listen; some of them will demand more. The one I think of in particular is Maundy Thursday. Footwashing is not a spectator event! Peter said to Jesus, “You will never wash my feet!” Jesus said to Peter, “Unless I wash you, you have no share with me.” [John 13:8] Please consider having your feet washed on Maundy Thursday. I don't want anyone to hurt themselves; if that's practically difficult for some reason, ask me about it, maybe we can work something out. If you're able – and only if you're able – please consider whether you might wash another person's feet on Maundy Thursday.

We might be called to make other responses too. I've said here before that there are times when we are particularly aware of the cross God is calling us to carry. There are times when we are especially aware of how Jesus has carried a cross for us. At those sorts of times Christians have often made the sign of the cross on their bodies with their hand. It is always appropriate for Christians to make the sign of the cross. I commend it to you, especially in this season that we're entering now.

From our baptism onwards, our Christian life together flows out of our common sense that we are God's beloved children. We act, knowing that the Holy Spirit is acting within us and alongside us. We are called to respond in knowledge and in desire. No one can do our loving for us. Let us pray together for grace to keep Lent well, and in this time to grow in love for God and neighbour.

Heavenly Father,
your Son battled with the powers of darkness,
and grew closer to you in the desert:
help us to use these days to grow in wisdom and prayer

that we may witness to your saving love
in Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen,