

The Catholic Parish of Petworth & Midhurst West Sussex

Fr Peter's Homily for The Baptism of The Lord (Year C)
January 9th 2022

The Christmas season, which ends today, is a season full of surprises. It all begins when the angel surprises Mary with the news that she is to be the mother of the Saviour; this is, of course, quite a surprise for Joseph, too; by this time the parents of John the Baptist have already been surprised, and before long an innkeeper in Bethlehem is going to be surprised by a young woman who gives birth in his stable. Then there are the shepherds, minding their flocks in the fields when suddenly – all around are angels singing and praising God: where did they come from? So the shepherds rush to Bethlehem and when Joseph and Mary open the door – surprise, a band of over-excited and none-too fragrant shepherds arrive, talking about angels. All the while, wise men in the east are surprised at the sight of an unexpected star, and surprised, too, by the unexplained and irresistible urge within them to select a bizarre choice of gifts and set off on a journey of hundreds of miles, not really knowing what they will find at its end.

And then there is today. This story comes some thirty years later, but all the same it packs the final surprise of the Christmas season. John has gathered a crowd around him on the riverbank, where he is baptising them. This sign of ritual washing, purification, repentance, renewal of life, is not something John has invented, it is a well-known part of Jewish practice, but there is something about what John says that is so authentic that the people are getting all excited, thinking that he might be the Messiah. Then it is surprise time again – it isn't John, the stand-out preacher of his day who is the Messiah, it is this other person hidden in the crowd; and surprise surprise, what is this man even doing here, not baptising people but standing in the line of people to be baptised? He is the only one who has no sin, so why is he standing there with all the sinners? Of all the surprises in the Christmas season, this one is perhaps the biggest. There in one place is John preaching, calling people to renewal of their lives, to turn things around, to change their priorities, their whole direction, and then there is the group of people listening to him, people who have heard him and said to themselves, 'yes he's right, I need to start over again, and I need to mark this in some way, let's wash my whole body as a symbol of washing and renewing my mind, my soul'. And where is Jesus? He isn't standing beside John, he is standing in the crowd. Why?

Well, I think the answer lies back in Bethlehem. Jesus, the Son of God, chose to live among us, to make his home with us, to live in an ordinary family in an ordinary town. Where will I make my home? With ordinary people. And the moment that he chose to do that he becomes a part of the story of ordinary everyday people. He lives with them, so their story is his story, and he feels what they are feeling. So, where is he going to be today, at the River Jordan? He is going to be in the crowd of ordinary people who know they need their lives turned around. He is going to stand between the man who hit someone in an argument and the woman who stole something from a neighbour, next to the tax collector who cheated people. They are there because they need their lives turned around. He doesn't need that, but he does want to be part of their story. He wants them to go home that

evening and tell their family and friends who they met that day. If there is one thing that everyone knows about Christmas, it is that stories matter. The stories that we hear and the ones that we tell matter, but our own stories, and the people that join us in them *really* matter. And so a whole crowd of people will go home that day having welcomed him into their story. And years later they will tell their grandchildren 'I once stood with him in a crowd, you know, long before he gathered followers around him and our leaders started to persecute him.'

So the big surprise today, as Jesus stands in the crowd, not on the preacher's soapbox, is that he wants to be a part of our stories: our individual stories, the stories of our church community, the stories of our families. He wants to pitch his tent with us. He wants people to remember that he was in the place where the people with problems were; the place where people with spirits in pain were; the place where people paralysed by the past were. He wants something of his divinity to wash off into that water, so that it will then wash over the people who have come for baptism. Everyone who emerges from the waters of baptism rises from them arm in arm with Jesus (or carried in his arms if they are an infant) and his story is now for ever a part of their story (and vice versa).

Wherever our lives are today, whatever chapter our story has reached, whether it be joy and delight at good news, or sadness at bad; hope and expectation for the future, or regrets for the past; a satisfied contentment, or a restless dissatisfaction; wherever your story is, the Lord who chose to line up with the sinners by the Jordan chooses to be a part of it. He is part of your story, fulfilling just what you most need, and you are part of his. And that is where the Christmas narrative brings us, and where it leaves us.