

Beloved

Planning

Lectionary Bible readings

RCL Epiphany 1 Year A
Isaiah 42.1-9, Psalm 29, Acts 10.34-43,
Matthew 3.13-17

Theme Call and response

Three weeks in which we see the stimulus for Jesus' ministry and destiny emerge from the Gospel readings. Read more about the theme on page 4 and in *Month by month* on the [WEB](#).

Week 2 of 3

Beloved Matthew 3.13-17

After the visit of the Magi and the exile in Egypt, Matthew turns straight to the proclamation of repentance by John the Baptist and Jesus' baptism. His ministry is affirmed by a voice declaring 'This is my Son, the Beloved'.

This week's reading provides an opportunity to:

- explore the story of Jesus' baptism
- identify signs of God's affirmation.

A Bible Study on this reading, suitable for midweek groups, is available on the [WEB](#).

ROOTS www.rootsontheweb.com

Week by week

Bible notes
Prayers
PostScript: up-to-the-minute comment
Bible Study
Children's Sheet
Further resources
Drama sketches
Sermon notes on a different Bible reading
Links to other materials for this week's readings

Hyperlinks, full details of books and footnotes are in *Further resources* on the [WEB](#).

Gather

Prepare the space

Display or project an image of Jesus' baptism. Provide a large jug of water and a bowl. If using the alternative way of presenting the word, you will need two glasses, a small pot plant, and a hand towel on a tray covered with a cloth.

Gathering words

Today we are exploring the meaning of Jesus' baptism by John in the Jordan River. When Jesus comes to be baptised, John is reluctant. However, Jesus insists this is part of God's plan. Immediately God's voice is heard acclaiming Jesus as 'My Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased'. Why it was necessary for Jesus to be baptised, and how important it is to be affirmed, are questions we will think about today.

Open the Word

Bible notes

Old Testament Isaiah 42.1-9

This section of Isaiah, composed while the Jewish leaders were exiled in Babylon, rebuilds the nation's hope through new images of God's love for them. This passage is the first of four 'servant songs'.

Who did Isaiah have in mind as the servant? One well-supported contemporary view is that the servant represents the whole people of Israel. Christians often read this as a prophecy of Christ, but it's important to acknowledge Isaiah's original intentions as far as possible.

There are three key words to describe the servant's work: light, covenant and justice. Light is the symbol of God's creative presence from the beginning (Genesis 1.3), covenant is the special relationship God offers God's people (Exodus 19.5), and justice is God's insistence that poor and rich are equal in God's sight (Amos 5.11-15). But the servant offers these gifts not to the Jews but to the nations (cf. Genesis 12.3).

Acknowledging the work done, God affirms his servant whole-heartedly:

upheld by God, chosen, a delight to God, anointed with God's spirit. The gift of the Spirit highlights the personal link between God and the servant and makes it possible for him to carry the responsibility of being chosen by God. In consequence of this, God finds delight in him.

Gospel Matthew 3.13-17

This story begins Matthew's account of Jesus' adult life, and the catalyst seems to be the ministry of John the Baptist, which Matthew has just described. Matthew tells us nothing about any earlier link between the two men but, nevertheless, both John and Jesus recognise that Jesus does not need John's baptism of repentance – John is a prophet (v.4) and recognises Jesus as the 'more powerful one' whose coming he has already foretold (vv.11-12).

Why does Jesus ask John to baptise him? Scholarly opinion varies. Jewish tradition saw ritual washing as the final step in the purification that made communion with God possible (Josephus Ant.18:5:2). Does Jesus undergo baptism to show his unique capacity to communicate with God? Righteousness (v.15) is faithful action flowing from a covenant relationship with God. Does baptism signal that Jesus' actions and whole life depend on his faithful obedience to God's will? Or does he seek baptism as a sign of his complete identification with the people he has come to serve? (cf. Philippians 2.7-8).

Whatever the reasoning, Jesus' baptism is followed by an affirmation of the dynamic relationship between himself and God. The open heaven tells us that the barrier between God and humanity is swept away (cf. John 1.51), and the image of the dove descending helps us visualise the bright glory of God flashing from heaven upon him, in an image that appeals to sight and touch. Finally, the voice echoes Isaiah's words – no longer 'my chosen' but simply 'my son', the one who is like me, able to act as my agent, the one who is beloved, as a son or daughter should be. The descending Spirit and God's words affirm Jesus at the beginning of his active ministry, providing the backdrop for all that lies ahead.

Beloved**Call and response Week 2**

Part of loving a baby is the constant instinct to protect her or him from harm. We shoo toddlers away from power sockets, and make sure children wear helmets when on their bikes. But part of loving a teenager is letting them take risks, trusting them to use their common sense; and then they go, ready to shape their own lives.

'This is my Son, the Beloved', says the voice from heaven. Letting-go love trusts the beloved child to handle difficulty and opposition. God entrusted his servant with the task of bringing light to the nations, such as the idolatrous Babylonians who had destroyed the Temple – not an easy undertaking. Then Jesus came, ready to face the challenge of proclaiming the gospel, the journey that would take him to the cross. God was well pleased with him, because God knew that his beloved Son could handle the risks and sustain the trust placed in him.

Q Does our experience support the Scriptures' claim that God 'upholds' us when we face difficulty in the quest to establish justice?

Q Matthew, Mark and Luke all narrate Jesus' baptism and follow it immediately with the account of the Temptations. Why does one lead to the other?

Sermon ideas

■ Don't forget *PostScript* on the [WEB](#): up-to-the-minute comment available on Thursday morning.

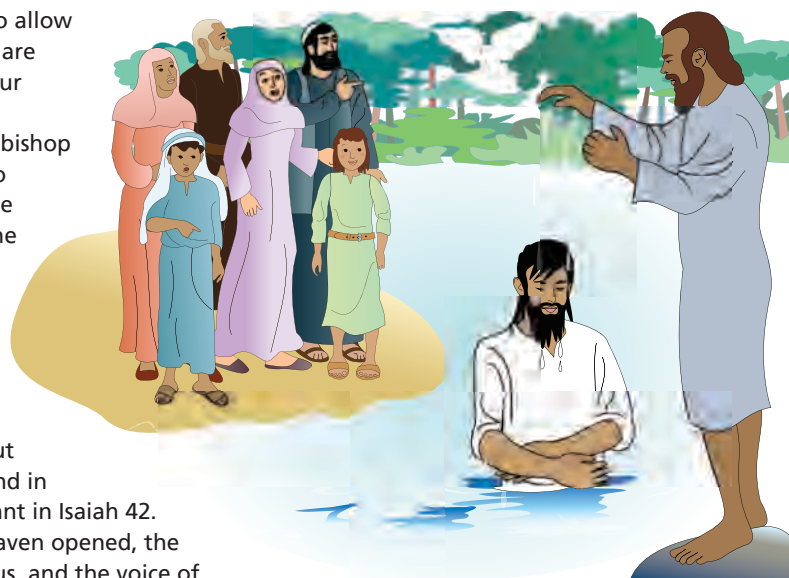
■ The baptism of Jesus is no mere rite of passage. It heralds the inauguration of his ministry, modelling both style and content. John the Baptist rightly recognises the inappropriateness of baptism for Jesus: he has no need of washing or repentance. Paradoxically, however, it is entirely fitting for the Saviour to immerse himself in a world of woe, identifying with us so as to redeem us – 'thus fulfilling all righteousness' (v.15). It was a radical act of obedience endorsed by heaven that cost him his life. Perhaps we need to think more carefully of the meaning and the challenge of baptism. One commentator on this reading, Dean Lucking, describes it as 'living wet'!¹ How can we live wet?

■ Are we prepared to allow God to surprise us, or are we held prisoner by our expectations? Robert Runcie, a former Archbishop of Canterbury, used to remark that one of the characteristics of divine activity was God's habit of surprising us. John had preached about the coming one in apocalyptic terms (Matthew 3.11-12), but Jesus comes quietly and in humility like the servant in Isaiah 42. Only afterwards is heaven opened, the dove descends on Jesus, and the voice of God rings out in affirmation.

■ A reviewer of CS Lewis' book *Mere Christianity*,² remarked that the author possessed 'the rare gift of making righteousness readable'. The gospels show Jesus unashamedly valuing righteousness (v.15) and the following he readily drew demonstrates that he managed to make it attractive. Too often we concur with the young girl's prayer: 'Lord, please make the bad people good, and the good people nice'. It would do a great service to Christianity if we attempted to rescue righteousness from its bad press. A way of thinking through this might lie in studying Jesus' humility and graciousness as he inaugurates his mission. William Barclay, in his commentaries, often talks of Jesus' 'winsomeness'.

■ Broadcaster Lavinia Byrne³ tells of the priest who asked Sunday school children: 'What were the words which came from God when Jesus stepped out of the water?' A child replied, 'You are my beloved daughter, and I love you very much'. That child heard God's affirmation; she knew God loved her. We must recognise in Jesus' baptism the implication that, through him, we too are beloved.

■ William Temple (another former Archbishop of Canterbury!) described Christianity as 'the most avowedly materialistic' of all great religions⁴. Our sacraments use tangible elements such as water, bread and wine or oil. Jesus does not divide the spiritual from the material; he is at home in both. The beloved Son immerses himself at his baptism in our world which, though muddy and murky



like the River Jordan, still retains its connection with its Maker. Consider the importance of the conjunction of water and the Spirit in baptism.

All ages together

See p.13 for an idea to engage very young children during worship.

Present the reading

Matthew's account lends itself to a dramatised reading for four voices: Narrator, John, Jesus and the voice of God. A script is available on the [WEB](#). A short rehearsal beforehand is recommended. The reading could be prefaced with a short introduction: Last week we heard of the visit of the Magi to the child Jesus. Nearly 30 years later, John the Baptist begins to preach in the desert. He summons the nation to 'Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near', preaching with such prophetic authority that crowds flock to listen to him. He urges people to turn their lives around, and to submit to baptism as a sign of the washing away of their past and beginning anew. He announces that he is but the herald of 'the one who is coming', who will baptise not with water but by fire. Hearing the reports of John, Jesus leaves his home in Nazareth to come to the River Jordan, where John is baptising.

Explore the reading

On the [WEB](#) you can find some suggestions for ways to think about Jesus' baptism, focusing on affirmation, love and support.

Prayers

The text of these prayers is on the [WEB](#).

Call to worship

'Beloved, in whom I delight, I have chosen you.'

Lord, as we meet to worship, fill us with your affirming love so that we may be empowered to serve you in your world.

Gathering prayer

Lord, you call us to follow you.

In your Son Jesus,

we see a life lived out in love and humble service for us in joyful obedience to you.

Enable us to live out your call with that same servant spirit, confident of your love.

Amen.

A prayer of approach

Lord,

we thank you that Jesus humbly chose to identify with us in our brokenness and sin.

He fulfilled your calling to be a servant to bring us home to you.

Father, you acclaimed him with delight as your beloved Son. Help us, by your Spirit

to know that through Jesus we are beloved, too.

Amen.

A prayer of confession

For those moments when our preconceptions blind us to your purposes:

forgive us, Lord.

For those times when we are deaf to your call:

forgive us, Lord.

For the occasions when we shrink from intimacy with you:

forgive us, Lord.

For those days when we consider ourselves too important to serve others:

forgive us, Lord.

For the opportunities we miss

in affirming those we meet or work with:

forgive us, Lord.

Gracious Lord, help us to begin again with opened eyes, attentive ears, hungry hearts and humble minds, for Jesus' sake.

Amen.

A prayer of thanksgiving

Lord, we cannot fathom why you should love us, but you do.

We cannot comprehend

why you should call us to be your servants, but you have.

We find it nigh impossible to grasp

why you should pour out your Spirit upon us, but you don't hold back.

Thank you for your love. Thank you for calling us.

Thank you for your Spirit's power.

Amen.

Prayers of intercession

Lord, your heart is to uphold your servants as they fulfil your mission in your world.

So we would pray for:

the upholders of justice for the powerless and oppressed.

Pour out your Spirit on them, we pray.

The encouragers of the downtrodden and those on the point of despair.

Pour out your Spirit on them, we pray.

The messengers who declare the truth of God's love.

Pour out your Spirit on them, we pray.

The light-bringers to those imprisoned in the darkness of ignorance and fear.

Pour out your Spirit on them, we pray.

And for us, too, as we seek to be Christ's servants in the communities where we live, work, or play.

May we be good news to those who know us, and to any with whom we come into contact.

Pour out your Spirit on us, we pray.

Amen.

A personal prayer

Lord, you turn things upside down and inside out.

You continually surprise us.

When Jesus came to begin his kingdom mission

he challenged expectations:

the Anointed One submits to baptism by the messenger;

the Holy One descends into an ocean of guilt, sin and shame;

the High and Lofty One embraces the role of a servant.

No wonder there was a fanfare from heaven!

Lord, when I am taken in by outward appearances

or false preconceptions about how I should act or work,

remind me of Jesus' baptism and how you see things differently.

Amen.

A way into prayer

Read Matthew 3.11-17 twice.

Imagine you are a spectator by the River Jordan. Listen to the crowds, the words of John the Baptist. Watch Jesus waiting in the queue. Witness the moment of baptism as Jesus goes under the water and then re-emerges. React to the signs from heaven. Reflect on the event and turn it into a simple prayer.

A prayer for all ages together

Gather in a circle. Turn to face the person on your right. Say together: 'You are beloved by God'. Then turn to face the person on your left. Say together: 'You are beloved by God'. Next face inwards and hold hands. Say together: 'You are beloved by God'. Finally turn outwards and extend hands towards the community in which you live. Shout: 'You are beloved, by God. Alleluia'.

Respond to the Word

Ideas to suit different interests, ages and learning preferences.
The Children's Sheet [WEB](#) offers activities to do in worship & at home.

Be loved beloved

Distribute copies of the poem 'Love is...' [WEB](#). John and the onlookers at Jesus' baptism needed to know how much he was beloved. Invite people to write more verses for the poem.

Picture this

The baptism of Christ was a favourite subject for artists. The plethora of images is an indication of the importance attached to Jesus' baptism in early Christian communities. Look at a collection of these images, using the links on the [WEB](#) or your own image search, and then invite people to create their own. Offer paints or pastels. Or work together to create a mosaic.

Affirm each other

As church buildings developed and became permanent structures, special circular buildings for baptism, called 'baptistries', were sometimes created. The baptismal pool was let into the floor and often large enough for several people to be baptised. The roof was domed and bore a picture of the baptism of Christ, so as the new Christian was let down into the water to be baptised, the image of Christ's baptism faced them. Gather together in tight circles, perhaps under patio umbrellas or parachutes, and say to one another, around the circle, words like those of the voice that spoke at Jesus' baptism: 'God says, "You are my child, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased."'

A simple worship activity for all ages

As each group is called they stand up and shout – those who have difficulty in standing can raise hands.

Who does God love? Does he love children? *Children: Yes!*
Who does God love? Does he love young people? *Y.P.: Yes!*
Who does God love? Does he love women? *Women: Yes!*
Who does God love? Does he love men? *Men: Yes!*
Together: God loves us all. Alleluia!
And he wants us to love one another.

When very young children are present

A chance to play with things that help us to explore Christ's baptism.

You will need: a blue cloth to represent water, two toy figures (John and Jesus), a dove, cut out from the template [WEB](#), shells, toy fish and water creatures. (Optional – bowl of water with splash mat, towels and plastic figures.)

Share this short paraphrase and actions. John pushed Jesus under the water to baptise him (*push hands down*). When Jesus came up out of the water (*lift hands up*), heaven was opened (*spread hands wide*) and the Spirit of God came down like a dove (*flutter hands down with thumbs linked*). A voice from heaven said: (*put hand to ear*), 'This is my dear Son (*hug yourself*) I am very pleased with him' (*nod*). Repeat so the children can join in.

Invite the children to play with the 'water'. Help them to retell the story using the toy figures and the dove.

Using today's psalm

Psalm 29

There is a huge contrast between the alternative response line and the text of the psalm today. From the description, the voice of the Lord brings anything but peace, and yet, we have just been celebrating the birth of the Prince of Peace, God's beloved Son, whose baptism is marked by a voice from heaven, where God sits enthroned over all. God's power comes across loud and clear in this psalm, which could be proclaimed by a group, splitting up the lines, some solo, some together – it is a really dramatic text that would set the scene for today's Gospel reading.

Singing together Go to musical support in the left-hand menu of the [WEB](#) for how to use the psalms.

Response line Between the verses, everyone says or sings: The voice of the Lord is upon the waters [the God of glory thunders] or The Lord shall give his people the blessing of peace. There is a response action on the [WEB](#).

Versions of Psalm 29 include 'Bring your tributes' (SFP), 'The voice which shakes the earth' (SGP).

Hymns and songs

Songs in italics are suitable for all ages.
A key to abbreviations is on the [WEB](#).

Awake, awake: fling off the night
Baptised in water
Christ, when for us you were baptised (CP, AMNS, BPW, HP)
He's got the whole world in his hands
Let there be love
Lord, I lift your name on high
Now is eternal life
O thou who camest from above
One more step along the world I go
River, wash over me (MP, PRA, SOF)
Songs of thankfulness and praise
Spirit of the living God
Take, O take me as I am (WGWG, CH4/HGSP, SGL, SP)
When Jesus came to Jordan

Send out

Live in faith

As people leave, give them cards [WEB](#) with a dove symbol and the following prayer printed on it:
Send me out, Lord, in the power of your Spirit, knowing I am beloved.
Amen.

Pray

Father, as you have loved us, so may we love.
Jesus, as you have called us, help us to follow.
Spirit, as you have sent us, fill us with your power.
Amen.