

## Honley Parish Church

9.vii.2017 – S. Matthew iii.13-17

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If you had come into church last week during the rain and walked down the north aisle, you'd have got very wet. I have a friend who is fond of saying church buildings are just glorified rain-shelters, and of course he's right. But for a while St Mary's hasn't even been that. Fortunately the builders have been at work and they've taken years of rubbish out of one of the valley gutters, so now we should be dry even if it is wet outside.

It's a modest reminder of how destructive water can be. In the first week of this series, we heard about how God brought order out of disorder when he spoke the world into being. His Spirit moved over the face of the waters and dry land appeared. And although the water was a place of chaos, it teemed with life. In the second week of this series, we heard about the destruction of the world in divine judgement, as the limits God had placed on the water were removed and the whole earth was flooded. And although the water was a means of judgement, God saved those he had chosen – just as he does in Jesus Christ, by his sovereign grace. He promised never to flood the earth again, and the rainbow was the sign.

This week, there is another use of water in view. This time, water is not merely a place of divine judgement, though it is that; it is also a place of salvation as Jesus is revealed to be the beloved Son of God. We're in Matthew 3.13-17, and it is Matthew's account of the baptism of Jesus.

The baptism of Jesus is an unusual event for a number of reasons. First, it is problematic! John tells us what his baptism is for: he says, 'I baptize...with water for repentance.' But Jesus has nothing of which to repent. He is the sinless Son of God. And yet the sinless Son of God, who has nothing of which to repent, undergoes a baptism of repentance.

Jesus himself explains what is going on. John objects to Jesus' baptism on the grounds that it would be more appropriate for Jesus to be the minister and John to be the candidate. Jesus' reply: 'It is proper for us to do this to fulfil all righteousness.' This baptism is a means by which righteousness is fulfilled.

Jesus is baptized as a representative of the people of God. He undergoes baptism on our behalf. By doing so, he points forward to the cross, where Jesus dies as the representative and substitute of all who put their trust in him. As St Paul puts it, 'God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.' Jesus fulfils all righteousness by undergoing a baptism of repentance because the death to which he is heading is the means by which righteousness will be imputed to his followers.

The water is a place of judgement, because it points forward to the death Jesus undergoes bearing the Church's sin. The water becomes a place of salvation, because through the death of Jesus the people of God are rescued from judgement. Thirdly, the water is a place of revelation. You will remember that at the beginning of Genesis, God the Father spoke his Word, and the

Spirit hovered over the waters. Right at the beginning of the Bible, Father, Son and Holy Spirit are at work in the creation of the world. In Jesus' baptism, something similar happens. In Genesis, the Spirit hovered over the waters. Here, at the River Jordan, the Spirit of God descends like a dove and alights on Jesus. In Genesis, God spoke. Here, at the River Jordan, a voice from heaven says, 'This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased.' Jesus is revealed to be the beloved Son of the Father, the second Person of the Trinity.

In the baptism of Jesus, the water is a place of judgement, as the sinless Jesus undergoes a baptism of repentance. The water is a place of salvation, as his baptism points forward to the cross where Jesus will identify with sinful humanity in his sin-bearing death. And the water is a place of revelation, as we see the Spirit descending like a dove and alighting on Jesus, and hear the voice of God declare Jesus to be the Son whom he loves.

Our own baptism was similar. When you were baptized, you were baptized into the death of Christ. As St Paul says in Romans 6, 'We were therefore buried with him through baptism into death in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, we too may live a new life.' 'Our old self was crucified with him.' When we were baptized with water, we were spiritually put to death. Baptism with water is about judgement.

But baptism with water is also about salvation. It is the sacramental means by which we are able to count ourselves alive to God in Jesus Christ. By God's grace, through faith in Jesus

Christ, we have been brought from death to life. That is the good news we share with the world. And so our baptism with water was a means of revelation, a visible proclamation of the grace of God.

On Thursday, the Church remembers John Keble, a nineteenth-century Victorian clergyman and poet. He wrote a collection of poems inspired by the Book of Common Prayer, *The Christian Year*. About Baptism, he writes this: 'In every Church a fountain springs / O'er which the eternal Dove / Hovers on softest wings.' He makes a natural connexion between the baptism of Jesus and our own baptism. And as in the baptism of Jesus, our own baptism speaks of the cross: 'What sparkles in that lucid flood / Is water, by gross mortals eyed: / But seen by Faith, 'tis blood / Out of a dear Friend's side.'

It may be that you were baptized many years ago as an infant, but have never really thought about what that meant. May I urge you to reflect on what happened? You were put to death with Christ. You were given the promise of new life. The grace of God was proclaimed. Make sure you don't ignore that promise. Make sure you don't make it null and void. Put your trust in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, and receive as a gift from God the new life of which baptism is the sign.