

Baptism of Christ (B)

- The celebration each year of the baptism of Jesus gives us the opportunity to renew again our appreciation of what baptism is really all about.
- And when we look at the baptism of Jesus we see that it was a sign - a public sign of the beginning of the public life of Jesus.
- It was a public declaration of Jesus being filled with the Holy Spirit & being sent by God to fulfill his mission, to do the work that he came into the world to do – to elevate the life of human beings, & especially those most downtrodden.
- Therefore, the whole purpose of the baptism of Jesus was to empower & direct Jesus to the work that he was being sent to do - a work entirely for the good of others.
- It is in the meaning that the Gospels give to the baptism of Jesus, that we find the meaning of our own baptism.
- So, our baptism, like that of Jesus, was also a public sign - a public sign of our being filled with the Holy Spirit & made members of the church - the church that continues the work of Jesus – to elevate & unite human beings.
- Therefore, by being baptized we are being sent by God to do work, the exact same work that Jesus did, the work of service to others, as the prophet Isaiah says - to bring understanding, justice & freedom to all.
- Why, then, are we baptized?
- Not primarily for ourselves & our own spiritual good; but to become disciples, apostles, witnesses; to be empowered to go out & build up the kingdom of God in the world; simply, to do God's work for the good of others.
- It is this positive, outward-directed, affirmative, active, altruistic aspect - this being chosen & sent to work for the good of others & for the world - that is clearly manifested in the baptism of Jesus, & is therefore the meaning of our own baptism.
- Baptism isn't just a christening or a naming, it is a commissioning.
- The baptized are called to ministry, to do the work of God.
- All of us are commissioned through our baptism to be representatives of Jesus; all of us were chosen by God for his mission.
- Baptism means for us exactly what it meant for Jesus that day he stepped into the River Jordan & was washed by John; he was beginning his public life, his mission; his baptism was his initiation, his entrance into that mission; he emerged from the water commissioned by the Father to do his work.
- In the waters of baptism we have been initiated into a community whose members claim that their relationship with God makes a good & positive difference to their lives, we have been called to discipleship by which we

follow & live out the Gospel values & we have been commissioned to minister God's values to others.

- Baptism is really counter-cultural to our western individualism that promotes the idea that self-interest & independence is the goal of all human actions & that this will make me happy & bring me fulfilment in life.
- Our happiness doesn't come from trying to ensure that all things satisfy me, but by striving to bring happiness to others – that's the paradox – it's in living for others that I find life.
- There is a Zulu word that is part of the African tribe's philosophy of life, & it intrigues me because it challenges our Western thinking & says something of the nature & purpose of Baptism – "Ubuntu", which means "I am, because you are".
- In fact, the word is just part of the Zulu phrase which literally means that a person is a person through other people.
- Ubuntu has its roots in humanist African philosophy, where the idea of community is one of the most essential building blocks of society.
- Archbishop Desmond Tutu offered a definition in a 1999 book he wrote: "A person with Ubuntu is open and available to others, affirming of others, & it comes from knowing that he or she belongs in a greater whole and is diminished when others are humiliated or diminished, when others are tortured or oppressed.
- We achieve ourselves by sharing ourselves with others, and caring for those around us, & this is the essence of baptism – giving of myself for the sake of the community of humanity by being inspired & empowered by the Spirit of Jesus to make a good difference to the world I touch.
- Humanity is a quality we owe to each other.
- We create each other & if we belong to each other, we participate in our creations: *we are because you are, & since you are, definitely I am.*
- We can't do it now because of COVID which means that we can't have water in our baptismal font, but normally, when you enter & leave the church & dip your hands into the baptismal font to make the Sign of the Cross, you are meant to think of your dignity, your call, the sacraments you are of God's presence & activity in the world & God's statement of your commission: "You are my Beloved in whom I am well pleased. Go & be my disciples".