

Epiphany 1: The Baptism of the Lord
Nelson Cathedral
January 12, 2025

Introduction

Today marks the end of something pretty special – the end of our Christmas season as we switch off the Christmas Tree Festival lights for another year.

But today also marks a beginning, which Howard Thurman describes in this poem:

“When the song of the angels is stilled,
when the star in the sky is gone,

when the kings and princes are home,
when the shepherds are back with their
flocks,

the work of Christmas begins:

to find the lost,

to heal the broken,
to feed the hungry,
to release the prisoner,
to rebuild the nations,
to bring peace among the people,
to make music in the heart.”

As the festive season finishes and we return to our regular lives and work, the work of living out the goodnews of Jesus begins.

For those of you who have had Christmas trees in the Cathedral, just as it is for us all, this is our ongoing work as we each play our part in making this community a better place. And as the events of the last two weeks have shown us, our support of each other is so very needed, now and always.

In the life of the Church, we mark this new beginning in what is called the Season of Epiphany, a word meaning the realisation of Jesus as the Messiah for the whole of humanity, which began last week with the story of the Magi or Wisemen, foreigners who who came to see the infant Jesus for themselves.

Over the coming weeks we continue this season by looking at various situations from Jesus' childhood. But just as our Christmas season finishes but the work of the goodnews of Christmas begins, today we skip forward to the Baptism of Jesus as both the end of the introduction about Jesus, and the commissioning of Jesus for his public ministry.

All this, to reminds us what the coming of Jesus means.

Baptism: Luke 3.

The baptism of Jesus is framed by two important passages in Luke's account which give it context.

1. The first is the ministry of John the Baptist, which in John's own words, was to prepare the way for the coming Messiah by proclaiming confession and repentance – a turning back to God - and the forgiveness that shows the goodness and grace of God.
2. The second is the theological genealogy of Jesus in chapter 4, something we usually skip over as a list of long names. But this is more than a simple family tree.

In Luke's genealogy, the purpose is very clear.

- Yes, Jesus was a true Israelite in every sense, even one from a royal family line.

- But Jesus is not just the promised messiah of Israel. His lineage stretches back to Adam, back to the one who is the representative of us all. Jesus is the Messiah, the saviour for all humanity.
- But even more, his lineage stretches back to God. As the voice of God stated at his baptism, Jesus is the “Son of God” which shows the global scope of God’s purposes in sending his Son into the world.

But as we think on the future ministry of Jesus, there is a question that remains:

- Why did Jesus get baptised by John?
- Did Jesus need to repent,
- Did Jesus need to be filled with the Holy Spirit?

Two aspects stand out as we consider Jesus’ baptism:

1. In being baptised by John, Jesus is confirming John’s ministry as true.
 - John is the one who was preparing the way for the coming Messiah.
 - John in baptising was turning people back to God.
 - And when John identifies Jesus as the promised Messiah he is correct. John is a true prophet of God because what he has said has come true.
 - So we can see the baptism of Jesus as an act of succession – Jesus is the focus even of John’s ministry.

2. More importantly, in this scene we more fully understand who Jesus is. We can treat the baptism of Jesus as his anointing, even his coronation.

- Baptism does not give to Jesus something he lacks or makes him something he was not. Jesus is and will always be God the Son.
- Rather the voice of God and the presence of the Holy Spirit confirm and give direction to what has been true all along - Jesus is he Messiah, the very presence of God with us.
- And this moment gives Jesus strength and encouragement as he begins his public ministry, which Luke implies is a private moment between Jesus and his heavenly Father - framed by the intimacy of prayer.

- In this moment Jesus is commissioned and empowered for what lies ahead and we see the full identity of Jesus as the Son of God - where sonship is a Kingly title.
- Jesus is more than the next great prophet after John. As John the greatest of prophets states, “he is not worthy to untie Jesus’ sandals”. Jesus is so much more.
- And we also see Jesus’ identity of servant taken from Isaiah 42, in the descending Spirit, where Jesus brings about God’s justice and God’s grace by walking the path to his ultimate sacrifice, his ultimate baptism, through suffering, death and then resurrection.

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The message of John the Baptist, the baptism of Jesus and his family tree together show where Jesus comes from, who he is, and where he is going. Jesus is the Son of God, commissioned and empowered as the servant of God – God’s very presence with us.

In this moment we also see the character of God as one of love. Jesus is the beloved Son, and when we come to Jesus and are part of his family, we too are called “beloved” through our faith in Jesus.

This is the new reality we see in our reading from Acts chapter 8, where the Spirit that anointed Jesus is now available to us all.

When we place our lives into God’s hands and receive his grace and love, we find a new identity as beloved Children of God, a new affirmation and strength, so we can be God’s people in the world through who we are and what we do.

The strength and endurance for such a path, as it was for Jesus, is prayer. We cannot build and strengthen our human relationships without talking to each other. And the same is true of our relationship with God, we too need to talk to Jesus and listen to Jesus – that what prayer is, that is how our relationship with God grows.

Conclusion:

Today we may switch off the Christmas Tree Lights, but that light now remains and shines in and through us. As we think about our year ahead, we too can reflect on how we can serve our neighbours, our community, our world, not with our own lights, but with the true light, the light of Jesus – the goodnews that God has come to us.

I want to finish by reading once more the poem by Howard Thurman:

“When the song of the angels is stilled,
when the star in the sky is gone,
when the kings and princes are home,
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flocks,
the work of Christmas begins:
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to heal the broken,
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to release the prisoner,
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Amen.