



## Jesus' Baptism and Covenant Service.

### **Introduction**

Today the church celebrates the Baptism of Christ. It is also the beginning of a new year, hence today we will be renewing our Covenant with God, using John Wesley's great Covenant prayer.

As we begin our worship in this new year of great uncertainty, let us quieten our hearts as we read, very slowly, this prayer:

**I weave a silence onto my lips.  
I weave a silence into my mind.  
I weave a silence within my heart.  
Calm me O God, as you stilled the storm.  
Still me, keep me from harm.  
Let all the noise within me cease.  
Fill me Lord, with your peace. Amen.**

### **Hymn** - Singing the Faith 455

So, as we sing or read this great hymn, at the start of this new year of uncertainty, let us remember where we are placing our trust.

All my hope on God is founded;  
he doth still my trust renew,  
me through change and chance he guideth,  
only good and only true.  
God unknown, he alone,  
calls my heart to be his own.

Daily doth the almighty Giver  
bounteous gifts on us bestow;  
his desire our soul delighteth,  
pleasure leads us where we go.  
Love doth stand, at his hand;  
joy doth wait on his command.

God's great goodness aye endureth,  
deep his wisdom, passing thought:  
splendor, light and life attend him,  
beauty springeth out of naught.  
Evermore, from his store,  
newborn worlds rise and adore.

Still from man to God eternal  
sacrifice of praise be done,  
high above all praises praising  
for the gift of Christ, his Son.  
Christ doth call, one and all:  
ye who follow shall not fall.

### **Confession**

If you are like me, you may not always feel such firm faith, such sure hope, such unshakeable trust. Let us then bring before God all that needs forgiveness: *(silence)*

God of mercy, hear us as we confess our sins to you.

For the sin that has made us slow to learn from Christ, reluctant to follow and afraid to be seen as your disciples  
**Father, forgive us**

For the sin which makes us half-hearted worshippers, slow to give thanks and unable to see your image in others **Father, forgive us**

For the sin which has made us ungenerous in sharing the gifts you have given us and irresponsible as stewards of your creation **Father, forgive us**

For the sin which tolerates injustice, is afraid of getting involved and indifferent to the suffering of others **Father, forgive us**

Hear again the words of Jesus: 'Neither do I condemn you. Go. Sin no more'.

We thank you, O God, for your full and free forgiveness. Give us the grace, in this new year, to be firm in our resolution to love and serve you above all things, through Christ our Lord. Amen.

**Hymn** - Singing the Faith 424

God forgave my sin in Jesus' name,  
I've been born again in Jesus' name,  
and in Jesus' name I come to you  
to share his love as he told me to.

*He said: 'Freely, freely you have received;  
freely, freely give.*

*Go in my name and because you believe,  
others will know that I live.'*

All power is given in Jesus' name,  
in earth and heaven in Jesus' name,  
and in Jesus' name I come to you  
to share his power as he told me to.

*He said: 'Freely, freely.....*

**Reading** Matthew 3:1 – 4:1

In those days John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness of Judea, proclaiming, <sup>2</sup>'Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.'<sup>3</sup> This is the one of whom the prophet Isaiah spoke when he said: 'The voice of one crying out in the wilderness: "Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight."'

<sup>4</sup> Now John wore clothing of camel's hair with a leather belt around his waist, and his food was locusts and wild honey. <sup>5</sup> Then the people of Jerusalem and all Judea were going out to him, and all the region along the Jordan, <sup>6</sup> and they were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins. <sup>7</sup> But when he saw many Pharisees and Sadducees coming for baptism, he said to them, 'You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? <sup>8</sup> Bear fruit worthy of repentance. <sup>9</sup> Do not presume to say to yourselves, "We have Abraham as our ancestor"; for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham. <sup>10</sup> Even now the axe is lying at the root of the trees; every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. <sup>11</sup> 'I baptize you with water for repentance, but one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to carry his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. <sup>12</sup> His winnowing-fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing-floor and will gather his wheat into the granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire.'

<sup>13</sup> Then Jesus came from Galilee to John at the Jordan, to be baptized by him. <sup>14</sup> John would have prevented him, saying, 'I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?' <sup>15</sup> But Jesus answered him, 'Let it be so now; for it is proper for us in this way to fulfil all righteousness.' Then

he consented. <sup>16</sup> And when Jesus had been baptized, just as he came up from the water, suddenly the heavens were opened to him and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and alighting on him. <sup>17</sup> And a voice from heaven said, 'This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased.'

4 Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil.

### **For the Word of the Lord, Thanks be to God.**

#### **Reflection**

On Monday, January 6<sup>th</sup>, we celebrated the Epiphany, the visit of the Magi. For most of us, it marks the end of the Christmas season, the time when we take down the Christmas decorations and, if the adverts are anything to go by, start thinking about booking a holiday. And today, apart from the incident of Jesus visiting the temple when he was twelve, we've jumped 30 years forward in Jesus' life, from being a baby to the moment when he is baptised by John in the Jordan. The intervening period forms what you might call the 'Wilderness years' – though that phrase is perhaps better reserved for John the Baptist, whom we meet again today. Indeed, we meet John in the Wilderness of Judea, at that semi-arid place where the Jordan meets the Dead Sea. I've included the whole of Matthew chapter 3 because it sets the scene for Jesus' baptism, which we celebrate today. It is, you might say, Jesus' 'coming out' - when he steps into the limelight and begins his public ministry.

John is an ascetic, a bit of a 'wild man'. He's coarsely dressed, living in the desert, eating locusts and wild honey. Many commentators believe that John must have had significant contact with the Qumran Monastic Communities who lived in that same area. They also practiced a sort of baptism, though it was a personal, ritual washing, done by oneself rather than conducted by someone else.

Unlike that closed community, John's mission was very much a public one. And it was one that clearly struck a chord, because people flocked from the cities to hear his tough preaching and to be baptised.

John's is an urgent message of imminent judgement. He tells people that the God's Kingdom is at hand - here and now! This ought to be good news. After all the people have been expecting the Messiah to come & deliver them from their enemies for centuries. So, to hear that the Kingdom of Heaven '**has**', in fact, come near, as Matthew puts it, should be great news indeed. But John's message isn't about a physical army, coming to deliver them from the Romans. Rather, his message is directed at **God's own people** – at **us**, in fact. John is calling God's people to repent and be baptised, as a sign of a new beginning; a sign of personal revival and renewal.

John's is an uncomfortable message from an uncomfortable man. He tells it like it is. He is straightforward, direct. He does not mince his words. He would have made a good Yorkshireman. John is not someone in line for an international diplomacy award. He appeals to those of us who, when we go to the doctor, want to know the worst. Just listen to what he says to the respected, Jewish, religious leaders of his day: 'You brood of vipers. Who warned **you** to flee from the wrath that is to come?' It's not a message likely to endear him to the hierarchy! But John reminds us that we often do people no favours by failing to be honest and straightforward. If someone has cancer, telling them not to worry or to take a couple of Paracetamols is not going to address their urgent need for medical treatment. And John's is indeed an **urgent call for radical treatment**, in the light

of God's coming judgement. It is a call for people to turn back to God and to do what is right and not to fool themselves - not to fool **ourselves** - into thinking that our special status as God's people will save us.

But the coming of God's Kingdom, for John, is not just an event. It is a **person**. John speaks about the special one who is to come, whose sandals **he** is not even worthy to carry. And unlike John's baptism, which is a symbolic washing with water, the coming one will baptise with the **Holy Spirit** and with **Fire**. These metaphors of the Holy Spirit and fire call to mind the Old Testament prophets. They speak of renewal - but also of judgement. The **refining fire** finds us out. It reveals what we are made of. It painfully burns away the dross and refines any pure gold in there.

And so, while John is preaching, warning, baptising, Jesus himself appears. And now, at last, we have reached the heart of today's gospel reading. His appearance seems no surprise to John. After all, they clearly knew each other and were related (probably 2<sup>nd</sup> cousins). But what is a complete surprise is Jesus' **insistence** that **John** should baptise **him**.

Like John, we might wonder: 'Why does **Jesus** need to be baptised?' But what Jesus is doing is **identifying completely** with humanity. This has echoes of the incarnation itself, which we so recently celebrated at Christmas. **Emmanuel**, God with us. God entering into every aspect of our lives. God humbling himself, submitting himself to someone else's ministry. Going under the waters of baptism at the hand of John. How hard it is, sometimes, to minister to someone we feel is superior to us, better than us. It's like, instead of receiving an MBE at Buckingham Palace, the King invites himself to our house and eats dinner in our kitchen!

**Jesus** does not need forgiveness. But this is not so much a moral act as one which is about fulfilling all the demands of the law, in order to allow **us** to enter into a right relationship with God, which is what '**righteousness**' is essentially about. 'Let it be so for now' says Jesus 'for it is proper in this way to fulfil all righteousness.'

So, John finally agrees to baptise Jesus. And, as Jesus rises up from the water, the heavens open and the Holy Spirit descends on him like a dove. As the wind of the Spirit fills Jesus and empowers him for his public ministry, which is about to begin, the Father says: 'This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased.' 'Beloved' also means '**chosen one**', the one who fulfils the words of the prophets, such as Isaiah 42, which says: 'Here is my servant, my **chosen one**, in whom I delight.'

The beginning of a new year is a good time to think about **our own** baptism. In most historic churches, the font is close to the main door. That is because baptism marks our first step into the life of faith. It is the point of welcome into God's family. It is as though we are saying to people, as they come through the door: 'Welcome! Come and join our family through baptism.' Or rather: 'Join **God's** family'. In baptism we are, as it were, **publicly** immersed into this new way of life. In baptism we '**come out**' and declare, before others our decision to **repent**. Indeed, repent means, literally, to turn around. To turn away from all that it is wrong and turn instead to Christ. The minister asks:

'Do you turn away from evil and all that denies God?' We reply: '**By the grace of God I do**'

'Do you turn to God, trusting in Jesus Christ as Lord and Saviour and in the Holy Spirit as helper and guide?' And we reply: '**By the grace of God, I do.**'

The minister does not baptise us '*en bloc*' but individually, by name, to remind us that God has chosen **each one of us**; that we are **all** God's beloved children and that he will never let go of us, even when we find it hard to hold on to him. And in baptism God sends the **Holy Spirit** into our hearts, to assure us of his love and to empower us for service. Like me, many of you will have been baptised as infants, so you won't remember it. But you will almost certainly have attended baptisms, maybe as parents or Godparents. So today is a good time to think, not just about Christ's baptism, but **our own**. To renew those promises made to God on our behalf and to celebrate **God's** promises to us.

However, I deliberately included the first verse of chapter 4 in our reading. Because Jesus emerges from the spiritual high of his baptism, to go straight out into the desert, to face all that the devil can throw at him. A real **baptism of fire**, you might say. If we are serious about renewing our Baptismal promises, at the start of this New Year, serious about renewing our covenant with God, we must expect no less. Discipleship is costly, for us as individuals and for us together as God's church. And if we **don't** find it costly, maybe it's because we're not taking it seriously enough.

I have been very moved and challenged recently by Alexei Navalny. He was the Russian opposition leader who was poisoned, but then recovered in hospital in Germany. Yet, despite knowing the dangers, he returned to Russia, only to be immediately arrested again and imprisoned. In prison he wrote about his experience, his choices, clearly knowing what awaited him. But Navalny was also a very committed Christian. At the end of his memoir, he asks this:

'Are **you** a disciple of the religion whose founder sacrificed himself for others? Do **you** believe in the immortality of the soul? If you can honestly answer '**yes**', then what is there left for you to worry about? Our job is to seek the Kingdom of God and his righteousness.'

Navalny was poisoned again while he was in prison and died on 16<sup>th</sup> February last year, aged just 47. There is a wonderful adaptation of his memoir, '**Patriot**', on BBC sounds, narrated by Benedict Cumberbatch. I do sincerely commend it to you. Navalny reminds us that Baptism does **not** end in the quiet security of being God's children. It is simply a beginning. The beginning of a life lived **publicly** and **sacrificially**, with the Holy Spirit and with fire. A life that demands of us, not less than **everything**, just as it demanded everything of John, everything of Jesus, and everything of Alexei Navalny - and of so many others down the centuries. And it is exactly that sort of re-commitment that is at the heart of John Wesley's Covenant Prayer.

So, the challenge for us, at the start of this new year, is: 'As a Christian, what am **I doing** that is really costly?' What is it that I am **resisting** doing, that I know I should? What are the **tough choices** that I'm dreading, but I know I need to make? What is God calling me to **leave behind**, to turn away from? What is God calling me to do, as his beloved, as his chosen one? What can **I** do, and what can **we** do, together, to make the Kingdom of God and his righteousness, come a little closer, as we enter this new year of 2025?

Take a minute or two, in silence, to think about this, before we renew our covenant together.

## **Covenant Renewal**

Sisters and brothers, let us accept our place within the Covenant which God has made with us.

**Committed as I am to Jesus Christ, committed as I am to this community,**

**Let me again accept my place with Him and others.**

**With God's Spirit, I accept God's purpose for me**

**And I gladly follow his call to love and serve Him in all my life.**

**Christ has many services to be done. Some are easy, others are difficult.**

**Some will bring praise, others criticism. Some we want to do. Others we do not.**

**In some we may please Christ and please ourselves.**

**In others, we cannot please Christ except by denying ourselves.**

**Yet the power to do all these things is given us by Christ,**

**who strengthens us, and relies on us.**

**In obedience we hear your call. In love we seek to do your will.**

**With joy we offer ourselves again to you.**

*(A time of silent reflection)*

We are no longer our own but yours.

**I am no longer my own but yours.**

**Put me to what you will, rank me with whom you will.**

**Put me to doing, put me to suffering.**

**Let me be employed for you or laid aside for you.**

**Exalted for you or brought low for you.**

**Let me be full, let me be empty.**

**Let me have all things, let me have nothing.**

**I freely and wholeheartedly yield all things to your pleasure and disposal.**

**And now, glorious and blessed God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit,**

**You are mine and I am yours. So be it.**

**And the Covenant now made on earth, let it be ratified in heaven. Amen.**

May God grant us the grace to be his disciples,  
and to give our all in loving and serving him.

Through Christ our Lord, **Amen**

## ***Intercessions***

First let us pray for those areas of the world and those issues facing the world which cause us  
alarm and distress *(Silence)*

**Lord in your mercy, hear our prayer**

Now let us pray for those known to us personally *(Silence)*

**Lord in your mercy, hear our prayer**

Now let us hold our own needs before God *(Silence)*

**Lord in your mercy, hear our prayer**

And now let us take time to thank God for all the blessings we see, in ourselves, in our loved ones  
and in the wider world *(Silence)*

**Lord in your mercy, hear our prayer**

We conclude our prayers saying together:

**Our Father in heaven,  
hallowed be your name.  
Your kingdom come,  
your will be done on earth as in  
heaven.  
Give us today our daily bread  
and forgive us our sins,**

**as we forgive those who sin  
against us.  
Save us from the time of trial  
and deliver us from evil.  
For the kingdom, the power and  
the glory are yours,  
now and forever. Amen.**

**Hymn** - Singing the Faith 566

Take my life, and let it be  
consecrated, Lord, to thee;  
take my moments and my days,  
let them flow in ceaseless praise.

Take my silver and my gold,  
not a mite would I withhold;  
take my intellect, and use  
every power as thou shalt choose.

Take my hands, and let them move  
at the impulse of thy love;  
take my feet, and let them be  
swift and beautiful for thee.

Take my will and make it thine;  
it shall be no longer mine.  
take my heart, it is thine own;  
it shall be thy royal throne.

Take my voice, and let me sing  
always, only, for my King;  
take my lips, and let them be  
filled with messages from thee.

Take my love; my Lord, I pour  
at thy feet its treasure store;  
take myself, and I will be  
ever, only, all for thee.

### **Blessing**

The Lord bless you and keep you.

The Lord make his face to shine upon you and be gracious to you.

The lord look kindly upon you and fill you with love and peace.

And the blessing of God Almighty, Father, Son and Holy Spirit,

Be among you and remain with you, now and always. **Amen.**

Let us go forward in peace, to love and serve the Lord

**In the name of Christ. Amen.**