

It was only a few weeks ago that we considered the encounter between Mary the mother of Jesus and Elizabeth the mother of John, both pregnant, both realising that the child growing inside each of them was God's gift – one the messenger, one the messiah. Yet here we are with both grown men. John's ministry has begun – out in the desert, with crowds coming to him, Jesus now too comes to John – but why?

(what's this picture?) Do you know the story of Archimedes? A king heard rumours that his crown was not made of pure gold, but had some silver mixed in with it too. He asked Archimedes to prove whether it was or wasn't pure gold.

Archimedes loved solving problems, but for a long time he couldn't solve this one. Then one day, he got in the bath, and there was so much water in the bath that it spilled over the sides. And this made him realise the answer to the king's problem! He was so excited that he leapt out of his bath and ran naked down the street shouting 'Eureka!' – which means 'I found it!' (If anyone is interested, the answer was that gold is denser than silver, so a pure gold crown displaces less water than a mixed silver and gold one of the same weight.)

Many congregations use actual water as a part of the remembrance, perhaps using a piece of greenery to splash water on the congregation or passing bowls of water among the congregation so people can put their fingers in it and perhaps apply it to their faces. The gospel readings for today could help frame such a practice.

There is a real eureka moment in our gospelreading – several, in fact – let's see what we can discover from this reading in Luke's gospel (open bibles at Luke 3)

Luke pictures John the Baptist as prophet, like God's messengers of old, yet one announcing a new age – the age of the Spirit, the age of the Kingdom, disruptively announcing that there's someone coming who would end the present evil age and finally and fully bring about the realm of God, a new world in which all things would live forever in love, peace, justice, mutual support, freedom, and dignity. His message is for people to get ready.

John called people to repent and to be baptized for the forgiveness of sins in order to be part of the coming new world. Repent is to turn away from complicity with the old age and its values and behaviors and to turn towards the coming realm. Those being baptised were given a physical assurance that their final destiny was no longer determined by the brokenness of the old age (and its world-power mad rulers) but would be the realm God.

Baptism was an invisible mark bringing those who received it into a community anticipating this new rule and reign of God. As the beginning of John's gospel makes clear (John 1:6? – he is not the one), and Luke echoes this (Luke 3:15-17), however, John is not the one through whom this transformation will take place – for that a second baptism is needed - The coming one -- Jesus -- will baptize the community with God's presence - his Holy Spirit

symbolised by dove, yet also fire – one whose very presence, echoed in Jesus life and death – bringing people to a place to make a real choice about whether they want to be a friend of God, or separated for him, not just in this world, but that the choices we make about this decision here, will affect how we spend eternity.

This is the focus of that word ‘repent’! Repentance is not feeling sorry for personal moral transgressions – doing 75 in a 70 zone, taking an extra biscuit. It’s as much about society as it is about individual response – about how community is complicit in old-age practices and values, and hence.

So to Jesus – or John’s eureka moment - When Jesus came to be baptized, he came to be publicly identified as the pivotal figure in the movement towards the rule and reign, the kingdom of God. Moreover, his baptism signalled that God the Father was now taking steps through the life, death and resurrection of Jesus to signal that the turning of the ages expected by John has now begun to take place. It is both present and future: its signs in the present point to the future consummation at Jesus’ return.

Jesus’ baptism takes place in community. It is not a private occurrence. What is true for Jesus is also true for us. when we are baptized, they become part of a new social world.

When a child is baptised (though it’s worth noting that the church of England baptises more adults than any other church) Wesley **‘We welcome you into the fellowship of faith; we are children of the same heavenly Father; we welcome you.’** Baptism is never private, never solitary, it’s community and sharing – committing together to be a new community of love – (if you’ve never been baptised/confirmed...)

The voice from heaven (God’s voice) identifies Jesus as God’s son, in whom God is well pleased. In first century context, these words have less to do with the nature of Jesus and more with his purpose. God’s words recall two texts. The Jewish people used Psalm 2 at the coronation of a new monarch. In 2:7, God adopts the monarch as God’s son. Thus, God adopts Jesus as divine representative in the final transition from old age to new age.

Isaiah 42:1-4 describes the calling of Israel as a community to serve God’s purpose, which is to bring justice to all the nations. Justice here refers to qualities of life similar to those of the kingdom of God - communities with support for all. As the gospel of Luke unfolds, we will learn that Jesus will suffer because other people oppose this calling in the way that Isaiah saw Israel suffer for standing up for God’s justice.

It was commonly thought at the time that God would begin this new thing by opening the barrier between heaven and earth and sending angel hosts to destroy and rebuild. Luke describes how the heavens open over Jesus. However, the Spirit descends without the angelic hosts, and in the form of an old testament (flood) sign of peace – the dove.

Of course, according to Jewish tradition, the Holy Spirit has been in the world since creation.

The difference for Luke is that the Spirit now is doing a new thing. The Spirit falls on Jesus not because the Spirit was not otherwise present but with a new sense of God’s power and

purpose. And if we know our bibles well, we discover that what was true of Jesus is, because of Pentecost, true of us – God longs to empower us too with his Spirit to enable us to be his kingdom messengers in word and deed.

Why “in *bodily* form?” Luke reassures listeners that that the Spirit had in fact filled Jesus. Bystanders *saw* the Holy Spirit enter Jesus. They could have confidence, then, that Jesus embodied the life of the Spirit by manifesting the qualities of the realm. Indeed, the realm of God takes on bodily form in Jesus and in the life of the church.

How much do we need the Holy Spirit today – he helps us to listen to God – echoing the other time that the Father affirms Jesus (Luke 9.35) – this is my son -listen to him. In listening we are called to repentance – to examine how far we fall short of Kingdom values, both individually and together, and having repented, we are baptised (again-by the Spirit – filled daily) – we take on board Jesus in Holy Communion – (that’s why baptism and confirmation are important – CE) . Notice that even though John remained in the desert, the people didn’t and more importantly Jesus didn’t – this empowering by the Spirit and affirmation of the Father was the beginning not the end – the beginning of Jesus healing, teaching and serving – so too for us – we too go to a world in need in Jesus name – showing a kingdom of love, grace, forgiveness

Jesus, your baptism fills us with wonder.
We marvel that you bowed to John’s ministry,
and humbly accepted baptism at his hands.

We worship and adore you
for immersing yourself in the same waters as sinners –
you, who had no need of repentance.

Father, we offer you our adoration
for your love of your Son, and of us, your children.
We are filled with awe at the Holy Spirit
descending gently as a dove.

We bow before you,
seeking the brushing of the Spirit’s wings on our heads also.
You have opened heaven to us,
and our hearts are full.

Amen.

Prayer (spirit...)
Water of Baptism
Holy Communion