

**SERMON, ST LEONARDS
11th JANUARY, 2026
The Baptism of Our Lord**

Is. 42:1-19

Psalm 29

Acts 10:34-43

Mt.3: 13-17

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be always acceptable in your sight O Lord, our strength and our Redeemer...

One of the gifts of Celtic Christianity to our religious language is the idea of the “thin place”. What this refers to is a place in which the membrane between this world and the next is fragile and permeable. Through it, the divine can reach out tentacles of wonder and joy, which we encounter at moments of sensitivity and stillness. Some thin places are widely known: Uluru is a thin place; Iona is a thin place; Mount Sinai is a thin place. This is what people go on pilgrimage to experience. I can remember, in my own experience, a visit to Assisi – a place enshrouded by centuries of prayer and devotion - in which I had what I can only describe as an unmediated encounter with the divine. I wasn’t surprised by this since I had, in some sense, been prepared for it since it came at the end of three weeks of pilgrimage. But I was no less confronted and profoundly moved by it.

Our psalmist today presents us with a different approach to this idea. I have to confess that this is one of my favourite psalms and the temptation to begin with it this morning has proven too strong. Put simply, this psalm is a response to a summer storm. Six times, the psalmist perceives “the voice of the Lord” in the majesty and awful power of the storm. It is heard in the crash of the thunder; in the howling of the wind that blows down mighty trees, or strips them of their bark or makes them sway and dance. It is heard in the forked lightning that splits the sky. And there is wonder and awe. In the Temple “...all cry ‘Glory’!” This is not so much a thin place as a “thin moment”: a second, an instant in a life when God breaks through. This is not something that we have to go on pilgrimage to encounter. We can encounter that wondering sense of the divine, what that great scholar of religion, Rudolf Otto, called “the numinous” in both the ordinary and the extraordinary: in the storm and in the silence. Here, in Denmark, where, as tourists are told “the forest meets the sea” we are particularly blessed in the bush and the sea-shore with the possibilities for thin moments.

But what happens when these things come together? The “thin place” and the “thin moment”? In the baptism of Jesus by John in the river Jordan, both things come together. Jesus’ baptism was a public occasion. John was baptizing outdoors, in the Jordan, and Matthew tells us that people came from all of the surrounding region. Some came to be baptised, excited that there was a prophet again in the nation. Others may well have come just to see the strange insect-eating man dressed in a camel’s hair robe, but perhaps these too might have been caught up in the excitement of his message. So when Jesus came from Galilee to see John, it was not a private meeting, but a public debate about who should baptise whom. This was not a short journey for Jesus. The traditional site of the baptism of Jesus is near Jericho, which is 140 km from Nazareth. This in itself is a good example of John’s drawing power. Jesus is unlikely to have come down on his own but with others drawn by the power of John’s name and message.

But Jesus was not some regular Galilean carpenter come to see the Baptizer. John and Jesus had known each other since childhood. John was Jesus’ big cousin, all of six months older. But more to the point, John did not only know Jesus as his cousin. He also recognised in him the one to whom he was pointing – the person whom his own ministry was all about. But when Jesus came to John for baptism, John hesitated. And Jesus was clear. “John,” he said “You have to baptise me because that is what God wants”. That’s a much simpler way of saying what is in the text of Matthew read to you a little while ago. “This is how God wants it”...Jesus recognised the requirement for him to be obedient to the will of the Father, to subject himself to baptism, because only through such obedience can the Incarnation have authenticity. Without that sense of obedience, that sense of commonality, even the divine in physical form would be just that – an outsider who comes to fix things – not a regular person subject to the rules, practices and customs of our own society.

But the events of Jesus’ baptism did not end there. This is really the point. As John brought Jesus up out of the water, we are brought to an indescribable encounter with the divine. Matthew speaks in symbolic language, no doubt because what actually occurred was beyond words. He tells us that “the heavens were opened” and the “Spirit of God” was descending “like a dove”. These are conventional words for the unconventional: the direct manifestation the *ruach hakodesh*, the Spirit of God, the divine force, the very presence that moves the universe – descended upon Jesus, and a voice proclaimed “this is my Son, my beloved, in whom I am well pleased”. Now that is a thin moment. Can you imagine being there: observing the meeting of the two cousins, hearing their discussion, knowing that somehow something special just might be happening. John puts Jesus into

the water, and lifts him out. Then all heaven breaks loose, and you know that, beyond a doubt, you are in the presence of the living God.

But we can take this even further. John's baptism of Jesus did not begin and end there. The Spirit of the Living God did not just swoop down, say a few words and then fly back to heaven. There is a profound and intricate connexion between the act of baptism, the Spirit of God and a human agent. When we baptize, whether adult or child, we repeat the work of John the Baptiser. Baptism always has a human agent. Jesus didn't just go down into the Jordan and come out again like he was taking a dip. John administered the baptism and Jesus submitted to it.

That work of baptism still continues. It is one of the joys and privileges of ministry to stand at the gates of the Kingdom and welcome people in through the sacrament of baptism. The heavens might not open, a bird might not descend, the sky might be silent, but the Spirit of God is no less present. That makes that font at the back of this church a thin place. For there is where it comes together: the candidate, the human agent, and the Spirit of God. But that font is not merely a thin place where the Spirit of God can break through the barriers of our daily lives. The act of Baptism is also a thin moment. In that instant, that baptism is one with all baptisms, as all baptisms are gateways to the same kingdom, the same community, the same citizenship. When thin place and thin moment unite, barriers of time and space melt away. Every baptizing priest is John; every baptized person is one with Christ as Christ is one with them; and the Spirit is always present in blessing and sanctification. In baptism we are born to a new life. Through it we signify our own desire to be made anew. The waters of the font draw us in to the Kingdom and out of this land of shadow; the oil of chrism with which we are anointed marks us out as the daughters and the sons of God – children by adoption, perhaps, as the Letter to the Ephesians puts it, but children nevertheless – and heirs to the Kingdom that is and is to come.

In his commentary on Matthew, the extraordinary and challenging theologian Stanley Hauerwas suggests that Jesus' baptism affirmed both his status as the Son of God, and his identification with suffering humanity. Hauerwas writes: "...what Jesus experiences following his baptism is something that all the baptized can claim. Each one, before any good work of which they might subsequently be capable and simply because of their union with Jesus, can take to themselves that divine assurance: "this is my beloved child, with whom I am well pleased."

The Lord be with you...