

SERMON – 9 JANUARY 2022 – ACTS 8, LUKE 3

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.



It has been an odd Christmas (I hope Matt doesn't mind me using his cartoon). The fact that we cancelled the crib services – which was the right decision, even though it was one I wish we hadn't had to make – meant that I didn't tell the story of the shepherds and the angels. The reading for Midnight Mass and for Christmas morning was John chapter 1 “in the beginning with the Word” – so, wonderful though that is, it feels as if something was missing. I think shepherds only washed their socks once this year in my hearing – unbelievable. Then we moved on very swiftly to St Stephen, the first Christian martyr, then back to three kings, now it's the baptism of Jesus, and then we're back to three kings this evening.



Outside church it was an odd Christmas too. I was expecting the kids to come for a few days after Christmas, then they decided to come beforehand. It was lovely to see them, but having to switch off and celebrate with them, and then switch on again to work, was odd – to say the least. It wasn't very nice when they all left on the morning of Christmas Eve – Hannah went at 7 in the morning as she was the doctor on duty in her surgery in Leeds that morning, Harry and Sarah went a bit later as they were doing Christmas with her parents.

Some of you, I know, didn't get the Christmas you wanted with the people you want – so apologies if my moans are rubbing salt in your wounds.

I am just very grateful to the BBC and other TV channels for ensuring I had a good, traditional Christmas. By the time I had watched “Casablanca”, “White Christmas”, “Robin of Sherwood”, “The Queen” and “Morecambe and Wise” I knew that – come tempest or plague – Christmas is Christmas.



These last four days we have been away, and have spent a quiet time at Gladstone's Library, just across the border at Hawarden, near Chester. It is a residential library in Gladstone's old home – anyone can book and stay. The food is excellent, the bedrooms warm and comfy, and the staff very pleasant. There is a huge, old-fashioned, theological, historical, literary library - Gladstone's library is the nucleus of the collection, but it has been added to, there is lots of good stuff, well organized and cared for. It is a silent library – no conversation, just whispers between the staff, no real interaction with other readers. You are expected to read, to study, to work. Julie – being the brains of the outfit – has produced what will no doubt be the basis of a paper on Dorothy L. Sayers, not just Lord Peter Wimsey, but her theological writing too.



However there was one occasion when I caught her making notes on a book intriguingly entitled “Jane Austen's Erotic Advice” – that might be more fun than a lecture on Dorothy L. Sayers!



The Baptism of Christ, Giovanni di Paolo - National Gallery of London

Using a morning to give some thought to my sermon, I found myself thinking about how far we had moved from a Judean river valley and a man in animal skins, eating locusts and wild honey, and calling people to repentance. John the Baptist and his disciples, his followers, on the outside of Society – calling people to repent, baptizing them in the Jordan, full of talk about a Messiah, of an overthrowing of everything that was normal and traditional, stable and solid. Yes, the idea of God at work with and through his people, of God sending His Messiah, of God’s action – they were all ancient beliefs, traditional beliefs – but it was the local rabbi in your synagogue, the priests in the temple in Jerusalem, these are the people who do religion for you, not some enthusiastic prophet in the middle of a desert talking about the Holy Spirit and fire.

This story of Jesus’s baptism in Luke’s gospel is very brief and to the point – made even briefer by the four verses they miss out, verses 18 to 20
 18 So, with many other exhortations, he proclaimed the good news to the people. ¹⁹But Herod the ruler, who had been rebuked by him because of Herodias, his brother’s wife, and because of all the evil things that Herod had done, ²⁰added to them all by shutting up John in prison.

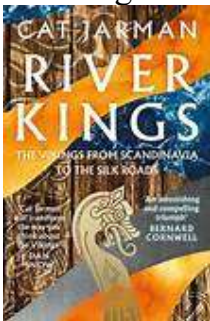
John is certainly not on the same wavelength as the leaders, John will pay for his opposition to Herod with his life. And the story of Jesus’s baptism – the start of the ministry of someone else who will pay with his life – it is very brief and to the point. Just the two verses:

Now when all the people were baptized, and when Jesus also had been baptized and was praying, the heaven was opened, ²²and the Holy Spirit descended upon him in bodily form like a dove. And a voice came from heaven, ‘You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.’



The most important thing in all of this is the coming of the Holy Spirit. God's affirmation of Jesus, an empowerment, a sign primarily for him. Something that made him feel special, affirmed, empowered, something that brought him closer to God (which, in one sense, is a daft idea – Jesus is God, he can't be brought closer to God – but on another level, I can believe that Jesus benefitted by being baptized). He knew it was the right thing to do.

Recently I was listening to the pastor of a nearby church telling us how wonderful the adult, believers, baptisms that they had had the previous Sunday had been. A sense of the Spirit moving among the people as a group of young men and women had passed through the waters of baptism. And I could relate to that – after all, I was baptized at the age of 16, Julie was baptized when we were at University – we know how marvellous it is when young people make a commitment, and I would love more of them to do so. But I am not going to turn away those who bring their babies to be Christened, even if they are not particularly sure why they are coming, even if they are not very comfortable when they get here, even if the Holy Spirit doesn't flow down in the same way it does elsewhere. Baptism is a sign of God's love, God's blessing, God's journeying with this child and with their family – and I will celebrate this with them and do all I can to help and encourage them on that journey. I want us as churches to celebrate with them and do all we can to help and encourage them on that journey. One of the things we have got to do in 2022 is re-start, re-invigorate, our work with children and young people – your help and encouragement will be vital for that.

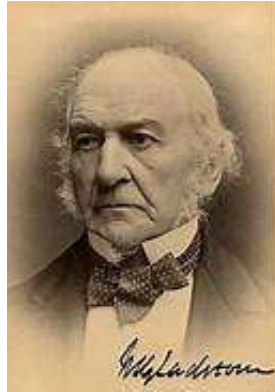
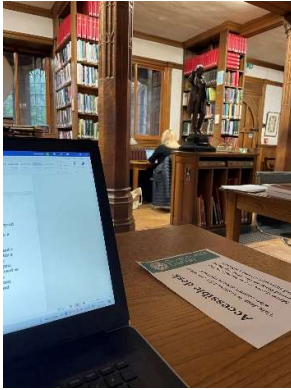


The journey that we are all on is fascinating – and I don't think any of us expected to be where we are now. It can be depressing, it can be exciting. One of the books I read while at Gladstone's Library was this one by Cat Jarman, *River Kings, the Vikings from Scandinavia to the Silk Roads*, *William Collins, 2021*. I had seen this in the bookshop at Bourneville we visited last year, had picked it up because it looked fascinating, and it certainly is. Cat Jarman is a

bioarchaeologist and a field archaeologist specialising in the Viking Age. She spent several years working with the finds from the excavations at Repton, where the Viking army overwintered in 874. Among the items excavated was a small bead of carnelian. In the book she traces where it came from. We journey from Repton down the Trent to Torksey, then across the North Sea to Sweden and the Viking territory we all know and dream of visiting (one day). Then inland and heading south we join the rivers that flow further south into the Black Sea and down to Constantinople. Then east through the Black Sea, across to the Caspian Sea, down to Baghdad, then out the Persian Gulf, and eventually to the western states of India. Whether an individual Viking ever made his way this far is doubtful – though we know they got to Constantinople – but they certainly traded this far. She writes “There is ... evidence that India was well-known in ninth-century England: a reference in the Anglo Saxon Chronicle for the year 883 – ten years after the Repton winter camp – mentions an embassy sent to the shrine of St Thomas in ‘India/Indea’ by none other than Alfred the Great. Having successfully fought off a Viking raid in London, Alfred vowed to send alms to both Rome and India, although many have argued that the latter was merely a mistranscription of Judea. However, both St Thomas and St Bartholomew, who is also mentioned in the entry, appear to have been martyred in India according to other ninth-century sources. There are documented Christian communities in Southern India from the fifth century onwards, so it certainly is not impossible” (page 293).



To be honest, it rather blows my mind that we went from John and Jesus and a group of disciples in the River Jordan, to a worldwide movement that within a few hundred years had spread round the Roman Empire – take yourself to Vindolanda right up on Hadrian’s Wall (above), at the farthest reaches of the Empire, and the archaeologists will point you to a building that they are sure was used as a church and a baptistry. Take yourself in the other direction, and there is evidence of the apostles planting a church in the soil of India – Thomas may well have been one of those men standing beside the Jordan with Jesus and John, he may have been baptised himself.



It blows my mind that I can sit and write this sermon, with a statue of Gladstone looking down on me – and the faith that is confirmed in the waters of baptism, is a faith that he and I – and you – share together.

I thought a Gladstone quote would be a good way of ending this sermon, so I had a browse. This is what he said in a Speech at the Foresters' Hall in Dalkeith, Scotland on 26 November 1879 as part of the Midlothian campaign – it is a message we need to hear in 2022, and I've put it on the front page of the website if you want to read it again.

“Remember the rights of the savage, as we call him. Remember that the happiness of his humble home, remember that the sanctity of life in the hill villages of Afghanistan among the winter snows, are as sacred in the eye of Almighty God as are your own. Remember that He who has united you together as human beings in the same flesh and blood, has bound you by the law of mutual love, that that mutual love is not limited by the shores of this island, is not limited by the boundaries of Christian civilisation, that it passes over the whole surface of the earth, and embraces the meanest along with the greatest in its wide scope.”

Peter Barham
8 January 2022