**Cranmer Group Sermon, Worship & Prayers**

**January 10th – The Baptism of Christ**

**(Genesis 1:1-5 and Mark 1:4-11)**

**“A Good Start?”**

*Dear Friends,*

*At the start of this New Year, as we again find ourselves in very difficult times, Scripture speaks to us through the Creation story and the baptism of Christ, about beginnings – “new starts”, if you like.*

*As I explore in my sermon for today, we can take comfort from God’s Word, and what it reveals to us in today’s readings about the person of our loving, Creator God, in three ways:*

* *God’s affirmation, in His power, that Creation is inherently good and a blessing to each one of us.*
* *God’s declaration of His love for Jesus at the moment of his baptism, even though his ministry had not, at that time, even begun; God loves us for whom we are, before we are even able to do anything for Him, not because of what we do for Him subsequently (although, of course, He celebrates that!).*
* *God’s calling of each one of us who follow Christ, thanks to Jesus’s death on the cross and resurrection, his daughter or son.*

 *I pray that this will bring you comfort today and always.*

*Do keep safe – may God’s blessings be upon you,*



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The Lord be with you **And also with you**

**The Collect for the Baptism of Christ (The 1st Sunday of Epiphany)
(Common Worship)**

Heavenly Father,
at the Jordan,
you revealed Jesus as your Son;
may we recognise him as our Lord,
and know ourselves to be
your beloved children;
through Jesus Christ our Saviour.
**Amen.**

**Come Down, O Love Divine**

**Played by Deborah Davies**

Come down, O Love divine!
Seek thou this soul of mine
And visit it with thine own ardour glowing;
O Comforter, draw near,
Within my heart appear,
And kindle it, thy holy flame bestowing.

O let it freely burn
Till earthly passions turn
To dust and ashes in its heat consuming;
And let your glorious light
Shine ever on my sight,
And clothe me round, the while my path illuming.

Let holy charity
Mine outward vesture be,
And lowliness become mine inner clothing;
True lowliness of heart,
Which takes the humbler part,
And o’er its own shortcomings weeps with loathing.

And so the yearning strong,
With which the soul will long,
Shall far outpass the power of human telling;
For none can guess its grace,
Till we become the place
Wherein the Holy Spirit makes his dwelling.

**Old Testament Reading: Genesis 1:1-5
(New International Version)**

**Read by Nick Finlay**

*In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. Now the earth was formless and empty, darkness was over the surface of the deep, and the Spirit of God was hovering over the waters.*

*And God said, ‘Let there be light,’ and there was light. God saw that the light was good, and he separated the light from the darkness. God called the light ‘day’, and the darkness he called ‘night’. And there was evening, and there was morning – the first day.*

**Gospel Reading: Mark 1:4-11
(New International Version)**

**Read by Caroline Coulter**

*And so John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness, preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. The whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem went out to him. Confessing their sins, they were baptised by him in the River Jordan. John wore clothing made of camel’s hair, with a leather belt round his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey. And this was his message: ‘After me comes the one more powerful than I, the straps of whose sandals I am not worthy to stoop down and untie. I baptise you with water, but he will baptise you with the Holy Spirit.’*

*At that time Jesus came from Nazareth in Galilee and was baptised by John in the Jordan. Just as Jesus was coming up out of the water, he saw heaven being torn open and the Spirit descending on him like a dove. And a voice came from heaven: ‘You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased.’*

**Sermon: “A New Start?” – Tim Chambers**
No sermon is ever delivered in a vacuum.

I - or any other preacher - am always approaching the Scriptures from a particular, personal perspective. You, as the congregation, both individually and collectively, are always receiving what I have to say, bringing to that place of connection, your personalities; your personal circumstances; the nature of your relationship with God at that moment. And of course none of us is isolated either, from a broader context, and all that we see happening around us in our locality and in the wider world at the time.

Nevertheless, there are Sundays when those connections to context are more implicit in what is shared, than spelt out clearly, or referred to directly, in the preacher’s words. This Sunday, however, is not – and I think CAN not be - one of those.

We have seen a week in which, in our own country, the appalling impact of Covid on lives and hospitals, families and communities, schools and businesses, has reached a new pitch of awfulness. And then - in images which, I don’t know about you, but certainly for me, had me transfixed to live TV reporting, with my jaw on the floor – we witnessed the President-inspired ransacking of the United States’ Capitol; their seat of government and order invaded by the forces of lawlessness and dis-order. What a way for us to start 2021!

It’s not really one of those weeks when I can speak from the Scriptures to you all without making explicit reference to what’s going on in the world around us, and without attempting to draw out what I believe God is saying to us through His word at this particular time.

And, as so often seems to happen - I wonder why?! – the Scriptures in the Church of England’s Lectionary that have been appointed for today, the day we celebrate the Baptism of Christ, have a particular resonance, I believe, for the situation in which we find ourselves.

At first glance, you may think that these two readings have little in common. On the one hand, we are at cosmic scale; on the other, we zoom in on just two figures, together in the River Jordan. But, in both cases, we are right at the start. The start, in the case of our passage from Genesis; the very first moments of Creation, formless and empty, out of which God separates the light and the dark. And then, from Mark’s Gospel, the start of Jesus’s three years of public ministry, as he’s baptised by John in the River Jordan, and in that precise moment receives the affirmation of his Heavenly Father.

In both of these moments too – at, if you like, the ultimate macro, as well as the micro, scale – the Holy Spirit is at the very centre of the drama. “The Spirit of God”, we read, “[hovers] over the waters” immediately before God’s command summons the light and the dark to become separate. And Jesus, as he comes up out of the waters of the Jordan, hears the words of his Father, and sees “the Spirit [descend] on him like a dove.”

At the start of this New Year, when all of us hoped that the awfulness of 2020 had been put behind us, these last few days have been deeply shocking and worrying. It may seem as though we’re not pulling out of the political and health crises we’ve endured over the last 12 months, but that instead we’re descending into even more difficult territory.

But I believe that both of our readings this morning give us reassurance, as we confront these challenges.

If we turn first to Genesis, we see the power of God at work, and what the exercise of His power brings about. In the beginning, there is formlessness, void and darkness. Although, particularly later in the Old Testament, evil is frequently equated with chaos, and with the swirling and surging waters of floods and of the deep; this formlessness and darkness at the very beginning, somehow have a morally neutral tone.

However, the presence and the command of God, separating the light and the dark; calling into being the first order and form to Creation, bring about an affirmation: “And God saw that the light was good”. This is the first of six affirmations in the Genesis Creation narrative, that what God brought about through his command was “good”; concluding, on seeing all that he had made, that it was “very good”.

Although we know, from the story of the Fall, that the actions of Adam and Eve open the door to the presence of evil in Creation; although so much around us at a time like now appears to be not of God and not of His will, appears to be chaotic, even evil; although all this is the case, we can take great heart from the knowledge that, at the very heart of the universe, is the form and order and light brought into being by our Creator God; that all of this is fundamentally good.

So, the underlying state of our world, for all that the enemy tries – in the words of Jesus in St. John’s Gospel, chapter 10 – to steal and kill and destroy, is one upheld by the purposes and power of God; which we can be confident has the goodness, with which God first brought it into being, at its very heart; and which brings pleasure to Him.

The importance of the presence of the Holy Spirit at this dawn of Creation is echoed in our Gospel reading, in the descent of this same Spirit upon Jesus at the moment of his baptism – the ‘dawning’ of his ministry. And the language with which God speaks of His Son echoes that of Genesis too: “You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased.” Even before he has started any of his ministry of teaching and healing; before he’s done anything which we might think would perhaps “justify” such an outpouring of God’s delight in him, Jesus’s Father makes this glorious declaration of love over him. Just as God affirms Creation’s inherent goodness, so, too, He affirms Christ’s absolute goodness.

And this matters to us, perhaps especially at a time like the present, because we know, as followers of Jesus Christ, that it’s the fact that, as he hung on the cross just three years after this moment of his baptism, Jesus took upon himself – upon one who was absolute goodness in human form – all of the sin and evil and death in the world. It’s only because of his divine goodness, that he was himself without sin, that he could take onto himself all of humanity’s sin, and be the one, perfect and complete sacrifice on behalf of all of us, such that we can have the chance to be reconciled to our Heavenly Father, both in this life and in the next.

But also, when God declares to Jesus in this moment of baptism that he is beloved, and that, in him, he is well pleased, God is also saying exactly the same to you and to me. Because when, as Christians, we are ourselves baptized, and when we are in active relationship with God - our relationship with Him is transformed, such that He sees not our sinful selves in front of Him, but the perfect person of Jesus, standing in our place. And so the words with which God addresses Jesus as he is baptised, are also spoken by Him over each one of us: “You are my son – or my daughter - whom I love; with you I am well pleased”.

We, too, like Christ in that moment of baptism, are filled with the Holy Spirit; the presence of God within us. The same dove which is the sign of peace; the same Spirit to whom Jesus refers, as he speaks with his disciples at the Last Supper, as the Comforter. Just as Jesus, even though he was God’s Son, came to John the Baptist to be cleansed in baptism; so God, in this time of turmoil and worry, sends to all who come before Him in humility, and who receive Him, His peace and His comfort, in the person of the Holy Spirit.

So in these very difficult times, these two readings, seemingly so different, speak to us in very similar ways, reinforcing one another.

First of all, a reminder that, for all that much of the world may look a dark and chaotic place at the moment, God affirms, in His power, that Creation is inherently good and a blessing to each one of us.

Second, when Jesus received his baptism from John, his Heavenly Father affirmed him in his absolute goodness, and declared his love for him, even though his ministry had not, at that time, even begun.

And, third, thanks to Jesus’s death on the cross and resurrection, God calls each one of us who follow Christ, his daughter or son. The Lord loves us as he does Jesus himself, and delights in each one, sending His Spirit upon each one of us too, that we may strive, in and through him, to live our lives in an ever more Christ-like way.

We can be confident, therefore, even in times as turbulent as this start of 2021, that God is ultimately in control, and that we can live our lives in this certainty.

And we are also given, through the Holy Spirit within each one of us – that same Spirit present at the very start of Creation; given to Jesus at the time of his baptism; and extended to us – we’re also given God’s gifts of peace and comfort. He loves us as he loves his own Son, Jesus Christ. But we’re not simply created to receive, but are created also to give; giving - as those who follow him - of ourselves, just as Christ himself did.

Immediately after he was baptized, Jesus retreated into the wilderness for forty days and nights, where he was tested by Satan. Don’t worry, I’m not suggesting that you should all head off into the wilds for forty days. But Jesus was affirmed and prepared by his Heavenly Father in preparation for what lay ahead, and in the expectation that he’d use the gifts with which his Father had blessed him, for the purposes of the Kingdom of God.

So, as we all face these turbulent and difficult times, we too are called to use all the gifts that God has given each one of us, to bring about that same Kingdom too. It’s a bit far-fetched to think that we may be able to influence political events on the other side of The Pond, but it is incumbent on us to ensure that we engage in the political sphere here in the UK in ways that, regardless of our political standpoint, respect and promote the rule of law and the integrity of our institutions and democratic processes.

And we’re called too, as many have already responded in our communities, to come alongside and support in emotional and practical ways those who have been most severely impacted by this dreadful pandemic – befriending those suffering from loneliness or mental health problems; supporting those who are sick; or who are struggling economically due to the all of the lockdowns. The Cranmer Foodhub is a wonderful, more formal, example of this, but I know that there are lots of you who are looking out for your friends and neighbours in many ways. Thank you so much for that; please, all, be encouraged in all you’re doing, and keep it up!

As we start this year, with all its great uncertainties and huge challenges, I share with you the opening lines of a poem by the Christian author, Minnie Louise Haskins, which King George VI used in his New Year’s Broadcast in 1939 – a prophetic word for a country soon also to be caught up in immense challenges; those of war:

*‘And I said to the man who stood at the gate of the year: “Give me a light that I may tread safely into the unknown.”*

*And he replied:*

*“Go out into the darkness and put your hand into the Hand of God. That shall be to you better than light and safer than a known way.”*

*So I went forth, and finding the Hand of God, trod gladly into the night. And He led me towards the hills & the breaking of day in the lone East.’*

I pray that each one of us, “finding the Hand of God”, his comfort, peace and courage, will also “tread gladly into the night,” in Jesus’ name. Amen.

**Intercessions**

**Led by Richard Bullock**

During our Intercessions I would be glad if, when I say, “Lord, in Your Mercy”, you could respond, “Hear our Prayer”:

Lord God, our loving Heavenly Father, we come to You today with our prayers of praise, thanksgiving adoration and intercession because we know that you have a constant and loving care for the whole of your creation so much that you sent your only Son to live among us and to give to us not only an example of how to live a life well-pleasing to you but also through Him to give to us the power by which we could follow that example.

We know, Lord, that often we fall short of the lives you would have us live but we thank you that your love for us is such that you restore us with loving-kindness to your path. We are above all conscious in these present days that we sometimes become confused and doubtful as to your will for each one of us. We pray that when in the busyness and turmoil of our lives we forget to trust you, you will never forget us and will restore our faith and strengthen our resolve to be your true disciples.

LORD, IN YOUR MERCY,
**Hear Our Prayer.**

We pray that by reading and studying your own precious word we shall see more clearly the love and power you offer us to follow you more closely so that we can re-affirm that we dare to trust in you to renew us each so that in the blazing heat of our fiercest challenges when flesh and blood alone would quail, we’ll fight and trust and still repeat that Jesus cannot fail.

We pray in particular that you will open our hearts and minds to the words Tim brings to us that you will speak to us individually in a special way to soothe the problems and concerns of the weeks and months and make us see afresh the brilliance of your tenderness for each one of us.

LORD, IN YOUR MERCY,
**Hear Our Prayer.**

We pray for all those suffering from Covid related illnesses and those who feel alone or lonely as the result of regulations imposed to protect the community from its spread. Help us to help each other, all those we know and love and, in particular, all members of our local communities in whatever way is most appropriate to our circumstances and their own.

We pray particularly for the children of Orston Primary School and the Archbishop Cranmer Academy who find themselves suddenly and unexpectedly in unusual and possibly bewildering environments, help us to show to them in the way we each live out our faith that they too may have the assurance that you are always with them. Keep them ever mindful of the lessons they have learned in their schools, and that you came to give to each one of them life in all its fullness.

LORD, IN YOUR MERCY,
**Hear Our Prayer.**

Above all Lord we pray that each one of us may be sensitive to your presence in our lives, and that you will be a constant companion through every aspect of our living as we seek to identify and follow your will for each us. May we be always mindful that we should trust you with our whole hearts and not be reliant solely on our own understanding, because in so doing we shall not only be sure to follow the path you have chosen for each one of ourselves but also, we shall be helping and supporting others in our community to realise the love and power you offer them to live without fear knowing that your perfect love casts out all fears.

LORD, IN YOUR MERCY,
**Hear Our Prayer.**

We pray that, in these turbulent and troubled times you will give wisdom and strength to the leaders of our churches and communities that they may recognise their role in encouraging, leading and organising local, national and international needs and resources for the good and benefit of all members of the communities they serve. May their leadership and decisions show them to be infused with your love and a recognition that we are in your creation all neighbours one of another, needing and deserving each other’s love and support to make and keep it as perfect as you intended.

LORD, IN YOUR MERCY,
**Hear Our Prayer**

Finally, Lord, We ask all this in the precious name of Him sent and acknowledged by you to become our Redeemer, Lord and Saviour, Jesus Christ, who taught us to pray to His Father, as Our Father….

**The Lord’s Prayer**

**Our Father, who art in Heaven,
Hallowed be Thy name,
Thy kingdom come,
Thy will be done,
On earth as it is in Heaven.
Give us this day our daily bread,
And forgive us our trespasses,
As we forgive those who trespass against us.
Lead us not into temptation,
But deliver us from evil.
For Thine is the kingdom,
The power and the glory,
For ever and ever,
Amen**

**The Collect for the Baptism of Christ (The 1st Sunday of Epiphany)
(The Book of Common Prayer)**

O Lord, we beseech thee mercifully to receive the prayers of thy people which call upon thee; and grant that they may both perceive and know what things they ought to do, and also may have grace and power faithfully to fulfil the same; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.
**Amen**

 **I, The Lord of Sea and Sky
Played by Deb Hubbard**

I, the Lord of sea and sky,
I have heard my people cry.
All who dwell in dark and sin
my hand will save.
I, who made the stars of night,
I will make their darkness bright.
Who will bear my light to them?
Whom shall I send?

Here I am, Lord. Is it I, Lord?
I have heard you calling in the night.
I will go, Lord, if you lead me.
I will hold your people in my heart.

I, the Lord of snow and rain,
I have borne my people’s pain.
I have wept for love of them.
They turn away.
I will break their hearts of stone,
give them hearts for love alone.
I will speak my words to them.
Whom shall I send?

Here I am, Lord. Is it I, Lord?
I have heard you calling in the night.
I will go, Lord, if you lead me.
I will hold your people in my heart.

I, the Lord of wind and flame,
I will send the poor and lame.
I will set a feast for them.
My hand will save.
Finest bread I will provide
till their hearts be satisfied.
I will give my life to them.
Whom shall I send?

Here I am, Lord. Is it I, Lord?
I have heard you calling in the night.
I will go, Lord, if you lead me.
I will hold your people in my heart.

**A Closing Blessing**

May God the Holy Spirit,
who came upon the beloved Son
at his baptism in the river Jordan,
pour out his gifts upon you
and the blessing of God almighty,
the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit,
be among you & remain with you always.
**Amen.**

Go in peace to love and serve the Lord.
**In the name of Christ, Amen.**