

**January 12, 2025 – Baptism of Christ – Revd Wim Kuiper
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Readings: Isaiah 43.1-7, Luke 3.15-17, 21-22

One of the joys of my ministry in the UK was the fact that I was able to do baptisms practically every Sunday. We could not do this during our regular services, as it is the custom in Sunderland that the parents invite their extended families on these big celebrations, sometimes over a 100 people. Sermons obviously needed to be very short. Giving just a few takeaways from that wonderful Gospel telling us about the baptism of Jesus that we have just heard, normally taken from Mark, which is the shortest version.

I always used to start with underlining that baptism means following in the footsteps of Jesus, as he was baptised himself. And that we should all hear and let those wonderful words of God deeply resonate within ourselves, that as we are baptised, we are also God's beloved daughters and sons, those in which he is well pleased. And, finally, with baptism our family becomes huge as all of God's people have become our brothers and sisters. As full members of his universal church we are part of that family to which billions of people belong. We are entitled to call as our homes all those countless chapels, churches and cathedrals all over the globe. Wherever we travel, wherever we end up living, there is a high likelihood to find brothers and sisters in Christ and such homes. I have just been able to enjoy this myself after long flights to the opposite end of the world, on two Sundays worshipping in Australian churches, even with the familiarity of the same hymn book and mostly the same liturgy. The fact that people continue to be baptised on all continents, hymns are sung and prayers are said on our planet without ceasing, and Christians come together on every Sunday to celebrate Christ's resurrection in so many places across the globe, is a strong reminder of how the Holy Spirit has been and is at work among us. A source of great hope, also at the beginning of this new year.

Have you noticed Luke writing at the start of today's Gospel passage that: 'the people were waiting expectantly'. Hearing these words at the beginning of 2025, I wonder if you are also full of expectations? Perhaps we have some nice prospects such as new births within our families, celebrations coming up or trips and holidays planned. Or a new place to live, a new job coming up for ourselves or our loved ones. We may also have some less nice expectations, rather concerns and worries. For instance about health issues or how to make ends meet. As Christians we have some other reasons to be filled with expectation. Namely, the expectation to experience God's love and the saving power of the Holy Spirit impacting this world and also our own lives in this new year. We have just heard those beautiful words from the prophet Isaiah:

'Fear not, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are mine. When you pass through the waters I will be with you; when you walk through the fire you shall not be burned'. Why not fill ourselves with the expectation that we will indeed experience Christ's closeness this year, in all that we will go through, the good and the not so good? Expect him to call us by our name to serve him in new and unexpected ways. Expect the Spirit to show us how to pass on to others, his unfailing love for us. And when we are longing for healing and forgiveness, let us expect that we may feel God's restoring and reconciling power in a profound way. At the start of this new year, let us simply open up ourselves to be surprised by God in whatever way.

Today's Gospel also gives us that somewhat strange image of the winnowing fork. What to make of that? Perhaps we can think of what accepting Jesus as the Messiah may do to us. How this continues to transform our inner being. How Jesus may help us with this transformation by stirring things up inside us. To let the wind of the Spirit breath on us, to help us distinguish the wheat from the chaff.

Distinguish between what is life giving for us and getting rid of all that is hindering us to lead the fruitful and fulfilled life that our loving Creator has in mind for us. Helping us to have all that is not good, evil, sinful, pains of the past, to be quenched in the refining fire of God's love. These are strong images that should not make us afraid, but give us hope of what God is able to do to us.

Finally, something else is striking in Luke's account of Jesus' baptism. Jesus simply stands in this row of people, waiting to be baptized by John. He of whom John the Baptizer says that he is not worthy to untie the strap of his sandals, is humble enough to simply wait for his turn at the end of the que. And after he is baptized he does not speak but remains silent as he prays. A silent prayer that is strong enough to hear the Father's voice proclaiming his love for him, which he rightly understands as the calling to his earthly ministry.

Humble and prayerful, ready to listen to God's calling on us to serve him, trusting in God's love and saving power and filled with the Holy Spirit, let us also in this new year, united with all of God's people, continue to follow in the footsteps of Jesus.

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