**May I speak in the name of God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen**

Last Monday, the first day back at school after the Christmas holidays, off I went to do my lollipopping shift, saying Happy New Year to people as I passed, or as they crossed, and sometimes following it with ‘it all seems a long time ago now’… There’s a sense of everything now going back to normal after the excitement of Christmas. Children back at school and all the usual activities picking up again.

But the Bible readings today remind us that with God, there’s not really any such a thing as ‘back to normal’. The call to be followers of Christ comes to us new every morning, and we are invited to look ahead to what God is asking of us each new day, not just each new year.

For the Early Church, there were a range of different points at which their story might be said to have started. One obvious answer might be: at Christmas, with the birth.

But in some ways, the story doesn’t begin with the birth of the Christ-child. It begins with his baptism, some thirty years later – and Jesus’ experience helps us to see how our own calling to Christian service and ministry might develop. And when I say ‘our own calling’, I really mean the individual calling each of us has: whether or not we have found it yet, there is a role for each of us to play – and each of those roles is important in the whole picture of Christian faith in this place.

John the Baptist’s ministry was a lot about looking ahead and about expectation. He certainly raised popular expectations. Is this the Messiah? the crowds were asking. John is baptising, and they are looking at John thinking: maybe he is the One. The One who is going to meet these expectations of ours. But John points always to Jesus – to the one coming after himself.

So in our context, what is it that people are waiting for in expectation? There is despair and dismay about what’s going on politically – but what, in our hearts, are we looking for, and what will fulfil that expectation? Many of the things people look for in our society don’t point to Jesus – so our job as Christians is to find ways in which those things in which people do place their expectations can point the route to Jesus.

John’s challenging prophecy and radical teaching, his baptism of repentance, all pointed to something new that God was doing. John was encouraging people to look further ahead, to the time when a more powerful one than he was would baptise with the Holy Spirit and with fire.

And then we hear that, after Jesus himself has been baptised, the Spirit descends on him. The believers in Samaria discovered the gift of the Holy Spirit through Peter and John’s visit, in Acts, the book that tells the story of the Early Church. The Spirit of God who hovered over the waters way back at the Creation continues its work in us and through us. But we have to find a way of allowing that to happen.

First and foremost, whatever we do as Christians is rooted in prayer. Prayer is a favourite theme of St. Luke. It’s Luke who gives us the story of the man at midnight banging on his neighbour’s door, and there are parables about the persistent widow and then the Pharisee and the tax collector, and all of these teach us important things about prayer. But above all we learn about prayer from the example of Jesus himself. Whether alone, or with others, at moments of joy or in crisis, we see Jesus’ life rooted and grounded in his relationship with God. That’s certainly true at this point at which his ministry is just beginning – it is as Jesus prays that heaven is opened and the Holy Spirit descends on him.

I was stopped by someone fairly recently, who told me: I don’t really know how to pray, so will you do it for me. Prayer is one of those things that feels like it ought to be mystical, and sometimes is yet often isn’t. It is talking to someone who knows you really well. It is talking in normal language to God. Or just naming someone in need before God. Or sometimes almost a silent primal scream before God. A groan of despair. Tears – of joy or pain. A tangle of feelings that you can’t put into words – but you don’t need to, because God knows anyway. It is being in the presence of God, and acknowledging the presence of God. It is bringing each situation, each person we encounter, consciously before God. Perhaps this now-old new year is an opportunity to think about and to discover fresh ways of praying.

So Jesus’ ministry begins with this particular anointing by the Holy Spirit, and with words of affirmation. When we know ourselves to be God’s beloved children, then everything we do stems from that place of deep security. We serve God because we know we’re already loved, not in order to find acceptance.

The story is told of an evangelist in India, who began his talk with the words: two thousand years ago…. And found that he immediately lost his audience. This was a distant myth he was telling them. But his fellow evangelist began his talk with the words: look, he is on his way…. That evangelist was not only addressing their hopes and expectations, but raising them too. And our job is to do that for others.

Incidentally, Jesus’ baptism was originally something of an embarrassment to the church: John proclaimed a baptism of repentance, yet Jesus was without sin, so why did he need to be baptised?

Picture the scene: Jesus goes down into the water and comes back up again. And a whole movement grew from that one event. The ripples flowed outwards from that, from him. One person was the source of everything that followed. Yes, of course, that one person was the Son of God, incarnate in human form, but that one person is how God comes to us: in small events, one moment, one insight, one nudge of heart or mind that has the power to align us differently. God touches our lives in small ways – or at least they seem small ways at the time - but they flow out in a new direction, or with new depth in our lives.

Baptism is at least in part about death – we plunge ourselves into death in order to rise differently. It is a part of the story that has to be explained quite carefully to people who have no previous experience of church. The symbolism of baptism with water is several-fold, but one of those elements is dying and rising to new life – a life that is in Christ, a life as a member of the people of God.

This series of events we celebrate at Epiphany – the arrival of the Magi, the baptism of Christ, culminating in the Presentation of Christ in the Temple – are pebbles in the pond. Each of them small human events, but with ripples that grow and spread out across the whole of the water.

John the Baptist’s chief concern was to point away from himself and towards Jesus. Our service, our calling isn’t ultimately so that we feel fulfilled, but in order that God is glorified and Jesus is made known. May we follow his example and pray that we might be John the Baptist for others.

**Amen**