**Epiphany 1 B**

**Genesis 1.1-5**

1In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth, 2the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep, while a wind from God swept over the face of the waters. 3Then God said, ‘Let there be light’; and there was light. 4And God saw that the light was good; and God separated the light from the darkness. 5God called the light Day, and the darkness he called Night. And there was evening and there was morning, the first day.

**Acts 19.1-7**

19While Apollos was in Corinth, Paul passed through the inland regions and came to Ephesus, where he found some disciples. 2He said to them, ‘Did you receive the Holy Spirit when you became believers?’ They replied, ‘No, we have not even heard that there is a Holy Spirit.’ 3Then he said, ‘Into what then were you baptized?’ They answered, ‘Into John’s baptism.’ 4Paul said, ‘John baptized with the baptism of repentance, telling the people to believe in the one who was to come after him, that is, in Jesus.’ 5On hearing this, they were baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus. 6When Paul had laid his hands on them, the Holy Spirit came upon them, and they spoke in tongues and prophesied— 7altogether there were about twelve of them.

**Mark 1.4-11**

4John the baptizer appeared in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. 5And people from the whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem were going out to him, and were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins. 6Now John was clothed with camel’s hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey. 7He proclaimed, ‘The one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to stoop down and untie the thong of his sandals. 8I have baptized you with water; but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.’

9 In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. 10And just as he was coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on him. 11And a voice came from heaven, ‘You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.’

I wonder if you – like me – are feeling a bit let down by 2021. Only a few weeks ago, the new year seemed to promise so much: the sacrifices of the last 10 months would start to pay off in falling infection rates, and mass vaccination would soon mean we could get back to normal. Now that hope has been swallowed up in grimmer statistics and yet more restrictions, paid for in grinding anxiety, countless lost opportunities and the exhausted faces of frontline workers. Our new start has been put on hold once again.

In the church’s calendar, this Sunday is all about new beginnings. It reminds us that whatever our present circumstances, God always offers us hope, and the chance of renewal. Today we celebrate the baptism of Jesus, the hinge moment which changed the course of his life; and we are reminded of our own baptisms and what they mean for our ongoing Christian journey.

The first reading took us back to the very birth of our world, to an unimaginable place before light and darkness where only God existed. On one level it’s a poetic description of the physics of an emerging planet, written long before scientific knowledge had started to explain its processes, but it’s also a statement of faith, God’s involvement in his creation from the very beginning. A wind from God – but that Hebrew word ‘wind’ could also be translated ‘breath’ or ‘spirit’ – swept over the surface of the watery world. God’s voice brought light out of darkness. And God saw the light and knew that it was good. So here at the very opening of the bible we are introduced to three themes: God’s spirit is present everywhere, even in primeval chaos; God calls creation into being by giving it a name; and God knows and values every element of his world.

If the first reading was about beginnings, today’s gospel is more of a starting-again story. Once more we’re in a scene of some chaos, as people mill around John the Baptist, an old-fashioned fire-and-brimstone preacher calling them to repent and change their ways. Among the jostling crowds is Jesus. We’re told elsewhere in the gospels that he was a carpenter, about 30 years old, respectable and well-liked but apparently not otherwise remarkable. Even John the Baptist, who knows that someone greater than him is about to appear, doesn’t seem in this version of the story to recognise Jesus as that person. It’s only when he’s standing deep in the Jordan river, that something happens to set Jesus apart. In an echo of the creation story, the Holy Spirit appears over the water in the form of a dove. God’s voice names Jesus the Beloved Son, and affirms him as a source of pleasure and delight. This moment marks the beginning of the ministry that will lead ultimately to Jesus’ death and resurrection, and change the face of the world.

But these pivotal events don’t just empower Jesus to embark on a new life. They give a new depth of meaning to baptism itself. John’s baptism symbolised the washing away of past sins so that people might start again and do better. It hinged on their determination to improve. The message to Jesus is that he is already beloved. Just as in Genesis, God saw that the light was good from the moment of its creation, so at the Jordan God tells Jesus that he is loved and valued before he embarks on his great mission – not for what he’s achieved, but for what he is.

You might say that that’s all very well for Jesus. He has just been revealed as God’s son. Of course God is pleased with him, just as any parent secretly knows that their child is the most talented, charming and good-looking of all. But God, it seems, is not quite like human parents, because wrapped up in the Christmas gift of the infant Jesus, God born as a human child, is the invitation to us to become God’s children. “To all who received him,” says the gospel of John, “he gave the right to become children of God.” How exactly to understand that transformation has been hotly debated, but St Paul, writing to the Romans, emphasises the vital role of the Holy Spirit: “The Spirit you received brought about your adoption to sonship.” In today’s second reading we heard how that moment was experienced by the early converts in Ephesus. By being baptised with John’s baptism, the believers had shown their intention to follow God. But their lives were only transformed when they received God’s seal of approval in the form of the Holy Spirit, filling them with unexpected gifts of speech and prophecy.

Christian baptism unites these two traditions. We are each symbolically washed clean of our sins. But the service also invokes the Holy Spirit, the living presence of God that infuses all things and all situations, so that our baptism represents not just a rejection of our old life but a new birth as children of God. We are given a candle to symbolise the light that no darkness can overcome. And we are welcomed by name as treasured members of God’s family. The Spirit who appeared at Jesus’ baptism has a message for all people: that we too are loved and valued, not for what we have done (or failed to do) but for our unique selves. If we are inclined to wonder how far that love really extends, we might find some pointers in the range of people Jesus later chose to spend his time with. The gospels describe him offering hope, healing and recognition to all sorts: the rich and successful, the suspicious and misguided, the ugly, smelly and deranged. Whoever we are, whatever our faults and flounderings, God sees our value and longs to make that fruitful. We are his beloved children; he takes pleasure in knowing us; and he offers us new hope through the Holy Spirit.

We should be aware, though, that that hope doesn’t promise us immunity from suffering. The first thing Jesus did after his baptism was to spend time in the wilderness battling with loneliness, deprivation and doubt. The rest of his life was marked by hardship and rejection. What God does offer is gifts of resilience which will allow us to transform our suffering and that of those around us. Paul urges all Christians to cultivate the gifts of the Spirit: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. This isn’t a list of new year’s resolutions, though, to be achieved through sheer will-power. It’s true that the work of becoming the people God intends us to be is an ongoing effort, requiring our cooperation as well as God’s generosity. There is a constant tension between the undertow of our selfishness and fear, and God’s call to trust him and love one another. But our success or failure is rooted in our ability to hear the message of the love God has for us.

Rowan Williams writes of the strength that comes from being able to take a step back from our immediate circumstances, and make space in our lives to hear God speaking our names. “To sustain ‘life in the Spirit’ under pressure, [he says] we need to retain the ability to say to God ‘tell me who I am’... quarrying down to that level where we can hear that God is creating me and you, now in this minute – breathing our names into the world, making us alive.” Hearing God’s voice won’t change our circumstances: it won’t erase our difficulties or halt the course of the pandemic. But it can give us the assurance that however dark things seem, God has not abandoned us, and that where there is love, there is always hope.