When we reach the Baptism of Jesus it seems like Christmas really is over. The Magi have departed, Jesus is no longer before us as a child, and we know that soon after this event he commences a ministry of teaching and healing.

In the Western Church the popularity of the story of the Magi has sidelined the Baptism of Jesus. But in the Eastern Church the Baptism has retained a more prominent role as the first of the great revelations of God in the Incarnate Son: the Word become flesh. We can’t restore what the church allowed to become separate, but we can recognize that there is a pattern of things here. When we celebrate Jesus’ Baptism it is possible to acknowledge that what we are focusing on is not different from what we have been celebrating these past weeks. The Baptism of Jesus is deeply connected to the story of the Shepherds and to Christmas day when we sang: “True God of true God, Light of light eternal, Son of the Father, begotten not created.” And it is of one piece with the Creedal affirmation that: “for us and our salvation, he came down from heaven”. Just as Jesus was plunged into the waters of the Jordan, so the Word that was with God at the beginning, “plunged into life” to live among us as divine love incarnated.

The Baptism of Jesus is a specific event, but it is also a manifestation of a fundamental pattern of the faith we hold: it proclaims that God, the living God, the one who envisaged, fashioned and directs creation, “embroiled himself” fully in human life.* [Embroil: become deeply involved with another in a difficult situation.]

The central claim of Christianity - which for many is a disconcerting scandal - is that Jesus Christ, who became deeply involved with all our human difficulties, is to his very fingertips, and to his heart’s innermost chamber, and in his memories, his hopes and his dreams: “absolutely human and absolutely divine”. He chose not to snatch at equality with God, but lived a life of obedience and trust, and the Spirit revealed that in him, the will of God came to be done on earth, as it is in heaven. This means “the central drama of the cosmos is the drama of humanity and divinity united”.* It means that “the gap between the zone of humanity and the zone of divinity is annihilated: Jesus is neither a god rigged up as a human being nor a human being rigged up as a god” [*Peter Steele, Bread for the Journey p .149]. To paraphrase John’s Gospel: he is to us what God is: God’s self-communication of divine, extravagant love.

Christianity insists on this knowledge. Christianity also says this is more than intellectual knowledge about Jesus: it is faith knowledge, knowledge that leads us to trust in Jesus and commit to him as the source of the meaning and purpose of our life. Knowledge that enables us to say who Jesus is, and how he helps us with our life.
When we stop to think about Jesus, we miss the point unless we see that who he is has to be seen on the biggest possible screen: one that has historical and cosmic reference points. If we were asked: do we baptize people because Jesus was Baptized we would reply: Yes, but there is more to it than that. The Baptism of Jesus is part of a whole pattern that we have come to know and trust, that shows us we live within a context of gracious love that calls from us the same kind of self-giving obedience that we see in him: and in this we find the meaning and purpose of life.

All of these themes are detectable in the readings for today. *Do not fear, I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are mine.* The reading from Isaiah is an amazing proclamation of hope directed to a remnant from the land of Judah exiled in Babylon. To people locked in despair, loss, and humiliation, the prophet declares: a change has taken place and a new day is dawning. They are being set free to return home to their land and their life: *Do not fear, I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are mine.* To be named by another is to be brought into a close and special relationship with the one who did the naming. Here Isaiah announced to a despairing people that their name, which God had given them, had not been forgotten. God was at work in the events of history seeking to honour the original YES spoken through the people of old. This insignificant band of uprooted people is now assured that precisely they are precious in God’s sight. They have been named, and now they are to be honoured and loved again. God has turned towards them to recreate them, and restore them to life.

If we have never had to struggle for life and freedom it may be hard for us to capture the wonder, the liberation of this announcement. But there are many in the world today who languish in a strange land, or worse, in detention, for whom a proclamation like this would evoke almost unbelievable joy. What Isaiah did for the exiles in Babylon was to offer a tangible sign of the divine promise: freedom was coming. And this was not just for the people of Judah: this was a big screen hope for a new beginning. Isaiah declared something about God, and showed that God wanted all people to share a hope like this.

Luke’s particular contribution to the Baptism of Jesus is to make it a sign of a new beginning, accompanied by the presence of the Spirit, and the voice of God over the waters. He also emphasizes Jesus’ Prayer, which not only means Jesus prayed, but that there was present in him a particular attitude of humility towards God.

The people of John’s day were hoping for a new start in life. John’s preaching was so evocative they began to wonder if he would deliver what they longed for. The graphic shows a ragged, eccentric John who is clearly pointing to another who carries the royal flag, and is depicted as the Passover Lamb. Jesus is the holy one of God. It is through his self-giving, his dying and his living, that we are lead forward into life with God.
Luke makes it clear that as Jesus passed through the waters, God was with him in a special way. The heavens opened for him and, as he prayed, the Spirit came: the holy, energizing, disturbing presence of God. And the voice from heaven was heard, naming him as the beloved Son. There is a link with the third day of Creation when the Spirit hovered over the face of the waters, and God spoke and the waters were subdued. And there is a link with the time when the people stood at the edge of the Red Sea, and God’s word through Moses carried them through the waters to freedom, to a new beginning, and another chance at life. That God’s voice was heard over the waters is hope for us. It means God has chosen to become embroiled with us, and that there is no chaos or darkness that has power over God. It means our exile is over because there is no longer anything that can separate us from God.

The Baptism of Jesus is about how the life-giver has become totally involved with us to show that we are beloved in Christ, and to make us part of an all-inclusive family joined by divine, renovating love. As we begin a new year of activity let us remember we are here because God has chosen to become embroiled with us. Our role as church is to so live in our relationship with the Beloved Son that others may be drawn into that relationship and know that God has begun to do a new thing in the world, for us and for all people to know and enjoy.

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