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Christ Church West Wimbledon
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“The Baptism of Christ”

THE BAPTISM OF CHRIST 2020

Events have moved on swiftly since we celebrated the Epiphany last Sunday. We've skipped all the intervening years, mainly because almost nothing is recorded after the visit of the Wise Men: except that Joseph, Mary and the baby fled away from Herod to Egypt until Herod's death when it was safe to return to Israel. In Matthew chapter 2 we read: ⁹When Herod died, an angel of the Lord suddenly appeared in a dream to Joseph in Egypt and said, ²⁰“Get up, take the child and his mother, and go to the land of Israel, for those who were seeking the child's life are dead.” ²¹Then Joseph got up, took the child and his mother, and went to the land of Israel. ²²But when he heard that Archelaus was ruling over Judea in place of his father Herod, he was afraid to go there. And after being warned in a dream, he went away to the district of Galilee. ²³There he made his home in a town called Nazareth, so that what had been spoken through the prophets might be fulfilled, “He will be called a Nazorean.” So we know almost nothing more from Matthew until he records the baptism of Jesus by John and the start of his public ministry. In one sense it is frustrating that we don't know more about the intervening years. In another sense it is an illustration of the way that often much is hidden by God. I discovered this hymn recently whose first verse goes: *‘When Jesus comes to be baptised, he leaves the hidden years behind, the years of safety and of peace, to bear the sins of humankind’.*

So this morning we remember the Baptism of Jesus – and in so doing we can celebrate our own baptism. Of course, few of us will remember the occasion

because it was probably our parents who brought us to church to be baptised – though inevitably there will be those who were baptised later as teenagers or adults. I was baptised when I was 9 months old – my parents had no particular religious background but they felt it was their duty to have me done, as they say. So still today we are delighted when a family want baptism for their new child. It is a public ceremony when they say ‘thank you’ to God for this child – and ask God to bless the new addition to their family, not knowing what may lie ahead but trusting that God will be there in that child’s life.

And we, in common with all churches, try to do our best to support and help. We warmly welcome children into our church. We like them to be here and we regard them as honoured members of the church family. It is wonderful that our Toddler Group is starting up again as that is a way in which the church can serve the local community and say ‘we are here for you and for your children’. Later on, through the work of our Junior Church we provide teaching when children can begin to learn what it means to be a Christian, to be a follower of Jesus the Nazorene. And that continues on into adulthood and beyond – all the time we are learning, growing – all of which began by our baptism. Of course, many don’t do much more after a baptism but nevertheless a seed has been planted and who knows how it will grow? Four-wheeler Christians?!

You may remember from last Sunday that the Epiphany is about Jesus Christ being revealed to the whole world. I stressed that the Epiphany is a feast when God says that this Jesus is for everyone, for the whole world without exception – and how important it is still today that all are made to feel at home when they come to worship, particularly the visitor, the stranger. The long-standing tradition of the guest being given the place of honour is a good one to for us not just to remember but to act upon each day.

We just have a duty to be as welcoming and open hearted as we can – and leave the rest up to God. So we ask God to turn us into people who are always happy to welcome all, striving to approach every person and every situation we encounter

with humility and gentleness of heart, in the same way that God through Jesus has approached and welcomed us.

Mind you there are dangers about going to church today. Listen to this anonymous account of a visitor to an Epiphany church service somewhere in America. "When the service was over, we blew out our candles and everyone started talking to each other – except to me, the stranger. They seemed a friendly, convivial bunch among themselves even if not to me. People visited among themselves. It was clear that everyone there except me was a regular member of the congregation and that they all knew each other well. I left".

In the spirit of the Epiphany always be on the lookout for the stranger, for the visitor – and don't overlook them – but genuinely welcome them with a smile, a word so that they will quickly feel part of the friendly convivial bunch that Christ Church tries to be.

I finish with a poem which was published over 100 years ago. It was quoted by King George VI in his Christmas Day broadcast in 1939, 80 years ago, as Britain faced a world war. May its words summarise what we all need to do at the start of this new decade, whether for a newly baptised child or for those of us who are many years down the road of Christian pilgrimage:

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."

Perhaps today we can all take encouragement from that poem and ask God to bless, guide and direct us all on our pilgrim journeys.