

**Circuit service 9<sup>th</sup> January 2022**  
**Prepared by Mr Tony Bell**

*Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever (Hebrews13:8).*

Let us worship him now and thank him for his unending goodness.

**Hymn:** StF743 Come let us join our cheerful songs with angels round the throne

<p>1 Come, let us join our cheerful songs with angels round the throne ; ten thousand thousand are their tongues, but all their joys are one.</p> <p>2 'Worthy the Lamb that died,' they cry, 'to be exalted thus !' 'Worthy the Lamb !' our lips reply, 'for he was slain for us.'</p>	<p>3 Jesus is worthy to receive honour and power divine ; and blessings, more than we can give, be, Lord, for ever thine.</p> <p>4 Let all creation join in one to bless the sacred name of him that sits upon the throne, and to adore the Lamb.</p> <p style="text-align: right;">Isaac Watts (1674–1748)</p>
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**Prayer**

We join all Earth and Heaven in praise, crying 'Worthy is the Lamb'.

We come to you Lord at the changing of the year. We do not know what lies ahead – whether it will be joy or sorrow. Whatever, we know that you will be with us, comforting us where there is sorrow and celebrating with us where there is joy. You came to stand alongside us when you were born a child in Bethlehem. You took our sins upon yourself as you committed yourself to the cross. You defeated evil when you rose again and ascended to glory. And you return to be with us now as your Spirit moves amongst us. Lord, may we be aware of your presence as we worship you now.

**Theme**

With Christmas behind us we look forward to new beginnings. The lectionary theme for today is the Baptism of Jesus by John the Baptist. Jesus travelled anonymously with the crowds to the River Jordan. As he rose from the water the Holy Spirit descended on him, a voice from heaven declared 'This is my Son'. John announced to the crowds, 'Behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.' Jesus was no longer anonymous and his ministry began.

**Prayer**

You are the Lord of new beginnings. As in baptism, may we be washed clean. We acknowledge our sinfulness. We commit ourselves now to following you. We lay open our souls before you for your healing. Touch our hearts, make us new, and lead us forward as we step out again on the way to your kingdom. In the name of Jesus our Lord, we pray. Amen.

**StF 430 My lips shall praise you**

or alternative hymn on theme of cleansing and renewal Songs of Fellowship 1674 Your love, shining like the sun (Pour over me)

<p><i>My lips shall praise you, my great Redeemer; my heart will worship almighty Saviour.</i></p> <p>1 You take all my guilt away, turn the darkest night to brightest day, you are the restorer of my soul.</p>	<p>2 Love that conquers every fear, in the midst of trouble you draw near, you are the restorer of my soul.</p> <p>3 You're the source of happiness, bringing peace when I am in distress, you are the restorer of my soul.</p> <p>Noël Richards (b. 1955) and Tricia Richards (b. 1960)</p>
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## Readings

Luke 3:15-22

Acts 8:14-17

## Sermon

I guess that most of us can't remember being baptised if we were baptised as a child. I had an uncle who was baptised twice – first time as a child. He then married an American lady and became a Southern Baptist. American Southern Baptists don't regard child baptism as valid. So he was baptised again as an adult. Apparently his mother, my grandmother, maybe understandably, was quite upset by this.

Baptism is a not a simple matter – it has different meanings in different contexts. Our two readings today are about baptism. The reading from Acts is about a baptism that was incomplete – more on this in a moment. The gospel reading is different again – it's about the baptism of Jesus by John the Baptist. Jesus's baptism was not a baptism for repentance. In Jesus's case it signalled the beginning of Jesus's ministry. It was when he went public with who he was and what he was here for.

The message of John the Baptist was *"Prepare the way of the Lord."* The crowds flocked to hear him – including religious leaders. John's message was uncompromising: *"Who warned you to flee from the coming wrath? Produce fruit in keeping with repentance."* Israel had sinned and this needed to be set right for the coming of the Messiah. People came in their hordes. They confessed their sins – and they were symbolically washed clean as John immersed them in the river Jordan.

Jesus came with the crowds for baptism. There's something unsettling about this - John felt it immediately. He already knew Jesus - they were part of the same extended family. John knew the secret that Jesus was the long-awaited Messiah. Surely it should be the other way round. *"I need to be baptised by you, and do you come to me?"* Jesus did not really explain. He simply said, *"Let it be so now, it is proper for us to do this to fulfil all righteousness."* Basically, Jesus was saying this is the right thing before God – but he didn't say why.

The significance of Jesus's baptism became apparent in what happened next. The four gospels tell the same story in slightly different ways. According to Luke, *The Holy Spirit descended on Jesus in bodily form like a dove. And a voice came from heaven, "You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased."* Some theologians have suggested that this was the point at which Jesus the man became Jesus the Son of God, but this is a distortion of what the Bible says elsewhere. As John's gospel puts it, *He was with God in the beginning. Through him, all things were made...* The significance was rather that this was the point at which Jesus began his ministry. As Luke wrote at the end of the baptism story, *'Now Jesus was about thirty years old when he began his ministry.'*

So why did Jesus begin his ministry by being baptised? The crowds came to John to repent and be washed clean. For Jesus, it was instead an anointing for ministry. And it was an anointing not so much by John. It was an anointing through John by God the Father through the Holy Spirit.

Jesus's ministry was not going to be the ministry of Jesus alone. It would be the ministry of God the Trinity – Father, Son and Holy Spirit. The whole Trinity was present in the baptism of Jesus: the Father who spoke from heaven: *"You are my Son, who I love; with you I am well pleased"*; the Holy Spirit who descended in bodily form like a dove. Following his baptism, the whole Trinity was present in Jesus's ministry. His ministry was rooted in the transcendence of the Father who blessed him. Jesus's ministry was effective through the power of the Spirit who reached into the hearts of people as Jesus taught and healed.

Similarly, the presence and activity of the Trinity can be found in our reading from Acts. Following a persecution, most of the believers left Jerusalem for safer places with only the apostles staying behind in Jerusalem. The believers preached the word wherever they went. Philip went to a city in Samaria.

Evidently Philip's preaching had a major impact and it got out of hand. It attracted the attention of a prominent sorcerer called Simon – Simon the magician as he is sometimes known. Simon saw Philip performing signs and miracles – and Simon wanted part of the action. The apostles dispatched Peter and John to sort it out. You need to read 25 verses of Acts 8 to get the full context. We read only four verses this morning. But in those four short verses the whole Trinity has a place. The new believers had accepted the 'word of God'. They had been baptised in the 'name of the Lord Jesus'. When Peter and John placed their hands on them 'they received the Holy Spirit.'

Wherever there is Christian ministry, it is a ministry of the whole Trinity. This was true of Jesus, it was true of the early church, and it is true of us now. I was born a cradle Methodist and I hope to depart this life in the arms of the Methodist church. But in between I have travelled down many byways of Christian belief from charismatic through evangelical to high church Anglo-Catholic. The one I wish I knew better is the Eastern Orthodox. I have to say that all these pathways have contributed positively to my faith and spirituality. Maybe one reason I am a Methodist is that Methodism has room for all of these. Some pathways figure more prominently than others in Methodism, but they are all present and there to be discovered. John Wesley himself embraced a wide range in spirituality. He was a high Anglican with charismatic gifts of preaching, a commitment to evangelism and a respect for science.

Different pathways have a leaning to one or another person of the Trinity. Some churches emphasise the transcendence of God the Father. Some churches emphasise the immanence of God in the person of Jesus. Some emphasise the present activity of God in the Holy Spirit. The truth is that God is all three persons in one. And our ministry is the ministry through us of the whole Trinity.

The apostles in Jerusalem were worried that the new believers in Samaria had not grasped the whole Trinity. They had responded to the word of God and had been baptised in Jesus, but they had not received the Spirit. That is not to say that they weren't Christians saved through the cross. But they did need to receive the Spirit to be up and running as a church with a mission. Other mistakes are possible. As an example of the opposite mistake, a few years later, the church in Corinth developed an unhealthy preoccupation with the gifts of the Spirit. Paul had to write firmly to them directing them back to the centre of the gospel of Christ crucified.

The message I suggest we take this morning is that we might examine ourselves and our churches to see whether we are Trinitarian as individuals and as congregations. Do we have a balanced view of God? Is our faith in Trinitarian balance? What does our prayer life say about our image of God? What does our worship say about our image of God? If we look at worship and spirituality in other denominations, do they point to ways in which our mission can become more fully God's mission? Even within the Reading and Basingstoke Circuit different congregations have different emphases. It's not that one is better than the other. Rather that we all have something to contribute to the greater good. Our mission is greater when we come together with our different offerings and gifts.

This is not just idle theological speculation. It's essential to the health of our church and the effectiveness of our mission. Imagine the new church in Samaria going forward without the Holy Spirit. Imagine the unthinkable – that Jesus's mission was not also the mission of the Father and the Spirit.

And it's not theological speculation as something we should think correctly about. Our faith and our mission is an expression of who we are in relationship to God. Faith and mission are things of the heart.

They are embedded in our experience of God as Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Do we stand in awe before the creation-sustaining Father? Do we know Jesus as our personal Lord and saviour? Do we feel the Spirit moving within us as we seek to serve God and those around us?

We are God’s church. Our mission is God’s mission. In his final words to the disciples at his ascension, Jesus said, *‘Go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.’* May we walk with faith into the future with our eyes open to the fulness of who God is – Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

**Hymn: StF 106 God whose almighty word**

<p>1 God, whose almighty word chaos and darkness heard, and took their flight, hear us, we humbly pray, and where the gospel day sheds not its glorious ray, let there be light !</p> <p>2 Christ, you have come to bring on your redeeming wing healing and sight, health to the sick in mind, sight to the inly blind, O to all humankind let there be light !</p>	<p>3 Spirit of truth and love, life-giving, holy Dove, speed forth your flight ; move on the waters’ face, bearing the lamp of grace, and in earth's darkest place let there be light !</p> <p>4 Blessèd and holy Three, glorious Trinity, Wisdom, Love, Might, boundless as ocean's tide rolling in fullest pride, through the world far and wide let there be light !</p> <p style="text-align: right;">John Marriott (1780–1825)</p>
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**Prayer**

(Note: these prayers were written last weekend; please feel free to insert your own prayers in the light of intervening events)

Holy God, the whole world is yours. You created it and sustain it. You breathe your Spirit of life into the world that it might become the new creation that finds fulfilment in Jesus Christ.

Lord, we see many crises before us and we pray for your leading as we seek answers.

Covid is still active as the omicron variant finds ways of rapid infection. We pray for scientists trying to get ahead of the virus, for the medical teams that exhaust themselves treating and vaccinating patients, for carers of the elderly, for governments making difficult decisions – and we pray for those mourning the loss of loved ones. We pray for young people who are suffering in their education and in their mental health.

As the signs of global warming become more insistent we pray for a common commitment across the nations to tackle this and do what is necessary. In both climate change and the treatment of Covid we pray for equality – that the rich may look after the poor and the vulnerable.

We pray for peace among the nations. We hold before you the potential flashpoints such as the Ukraine and the islands off the coast of China. Thank you for the many years since all-out global conflict. May the powerful nations accommodate each other peacefully – and may the weaker nations not be sacrificed to power politics. We hold before you the present disparities of wealth between the northern and southern hemispheres.

We pray for our local communities – for freedom from drugs and knife-crime amongst the young. We thank you for the benefits of living in a settled society. We thank you for all those who through their employment, by volunteering, or simply by being good neighbours, work to help the vulnerable. We pray for those who are ill or frail or lonely. We name before you those personally on our minds. We ask your blessing upon them.

Lord, in all things you are a loving Lord who cares for us and gave yourself for others. Teach us to follow in your footsteps.

Lord, in your mercy – hear our prayer.

### **Lord's Prayer**

Our Father who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name, thy kingdom come, they will be done on Earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread, and forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom, the power and the glory, for ever and ever. Amen

### **The offering**

Lord we ask you to bless the offerings we make – offerings of money, of our service, and of our very selves. Accept our offering and use it for the coming of your kingdom.

### **Hymn: StF 692 Thy hand O God has guided your flock from age to age**

<p>1 Your hand, O God, has guided your flock, from age to age ; the wondrous tale is written, full clear, on every page ; our forebears owned your goodness, and we their deeds record ; and both of this bear witness : one Church, one faith, one Lord.</p> <p>2 Your heralds brought glad tidings to greatest, as to least ; they summoned all to hasten and share the great King's feast ; their gospel of redemption, sin pardoned, right restored, was all in this enfolded : one Church, one faith, one Lord.</p>	<p>3 Your mercy will not fail us, nor leave your work undone ; with your right hand to help us, the victory shall be won ; and then, by all creation, your name shall be adored, and this shall be our anthem : one Church, one faith, one Lord.</p> <p>Edward Hayes Plumtre (1821–1891)</p>
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### **Let us bless one another:**

*May the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit, be with us all evermore.*