

Sermon for Sunday 11 January 2026 – The Baptism of Christ (First Sunday of Epiphany)

Texts: Isaiah 42:1-9; Acts 10.34-43; Matthew 3.13-end

Responding to the light

It never ceases to amaze me, although I should be used to it by now, how dark the mornings in early January are. It's a quality of darkness, that makes one peer suspiciously at the alarm clock in the morning, as you think, "It can't possibly be time to get up if it's still so dark".

This physical darkness contributes also to the general sense of gloom which can overtake us in the early New Year. Christmas and indeed Christmastide is over, most of the decorations have come down and we are perhaps aware of pressures on our waistlines because of our Christmas celebrations and pressures too on our wallets now for the same reason.

This year, this sense of darkness is compounded for us here in Switzerland because of the terrible tragedy at Crans-Montana on New Year's Day. As services were held across the country on Friday including observing a minute's silence, we realised that is some sorrow which is so deep that we cannot find words to express it.

We are also, I think, each one of us, burdened by the daily news which seems to reveal our world on the edge of madness, with acts of international acts of aggression, bullying and tyranny which would have been unthinkable even a decade ago, now appearing to be seen as the new normal and unstoppable.

Yet in the face of all this, light is breaking into the world. In the Christian Year, we are now in the season of Epiphanytide which started last week on the Feast of the Epiphany when we celebrated the manifestation of the light of Christ to the Gentiles. The light shines in the darkness and the darkness does not overcome it. What is more, that light is on the move.

Now there are various ways in which we can respond to light. We may feel it hurts our eyes and is too much to cope with so we attempt to extinguish it. We may feel bewildered by it, like a rabbit dazzled by a car's headlights at night so it remains helplessly rooted to the spot. We may be memorised by the light temporarily, like watching a firework which explodes in the night sky but then remain in darkness. Or we may be illuminated by the light so that we see what it is revealing both about ourselves and the environment surrounding us.

We are reminded today in our reading from Isaiah that the world has always known spiritual as well as physical darkness. We're reminded that injustice, oppression and physical and mental suffering occur because of our human tendency to sin, which leads people, including at times, ourselves, to put idols of seeking wealth, power and control above the well-being of others and care of the world.

Yet we are also shown in our Bible readings today that this is not the last word. In Isaiah we hear of God's servant, who is God's chosen one and in whom God

delights. Through his servant, God's righteousness is revealed to the world – a righteousness rooted on justice and care for all which cannot be overthrown or airbrushed out. He brings good news – justice, liberation to those who are imprisoned, sight to those blinded by the darkness of the world.

This servant is a prophetic figure, often linked to suffering and referred to as 'The Suffering Servant'. This is the first of four references to him in the book of Isaiah. At various times in Israel's history, the servant has been identified variously as an individual, the whole people of Israel or a remnant of the people. With coming of Christianity, we have identified the suffering servant as a prophecy of Christ, the one who brings redemption to his people.

And in our Gospel today, we see how God's promise, the covenant which was referred to in Isaiah, is being fulfilled. At Christmas, we celebrated the light of God coming into the world through the incarnation of Jesus, God's own Son. Now that light is growing, as Jesus, now as a mature adult, comes to John the Baptist seeking baptism.

We can understand, perhaps, why John was astonished by Jesus' request. Throughout his ministry. John had been teaching his disciples and those who came to him for baptism that he was not the Messiah but rather, like the prophet Elijah, the one who would prepare the way for his coming. He discerned that Jesus was indeed the holy one and that he should be receiving baptism at his hands.

Yet Jesus insists, stating that this proper for in this way they may fulfil all righteousness. The key word here is 'fulfil' -God's promise of redemption which his servant will bring is being fulfilled through this sacrament of baptism. As Jesus arises from the water after his baptism, both he and John see the Spirit of God descend upon him and they hear the voice from heaven saying, "This is my Son, my Beloved, with whom I am well pleased. Jesus immediately after his baptism is led by the Spirit into the wilderness, and after a period of deep discernment and testing, begins his ministry.

The light of God continues to spread. After Jesus' death on the Cross, his resurrection and ascension, God's Holy Spirit is poured on his disciples at Pentecost and they now, in the power of the Spirit, carry that light into the world. The context of our reading from the book of Acts today – shows how powerfully the light is spreading, For Peter, who is a Jew. is in the house of Cornelius, a Roman centurion. Cornelius has summoned Peter and Peter has come through the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. Now as Cornelius hears Peter speak of Jesus, the Holy Spirit is poured out on all who are present including the Gentile household of Cornelius, Peter realises in a moment of profound insight, that God's promise of salvation is not restricted to the Jews but is for all people, He immediately baptises Cornelius and his household, rejoicing in the fulfilment of God's promises.

Today as we commemorate the Baptism of Jesus, we remember that baptism is about our inner and outer transformation. At his baptism, Jesus received the gift of the Holy Spirit from God and in the power of that Spirit, went on to start his ministry. His ministry was characterised by those qualities to which Isaiah had referred,

shedding the light of God's justice and righteousness on the darkness, injustice and suffering of the world and bringing healing, new light and new life to those who came to him.

In our baptism we too seek God's grace that we may put to death our enslavement to the darkness of this world and instead, clothed in the light of Christ, become ourselves, witnesses to that light. We will be reminded of this very soon when Theo, the baby son of David and Charlotte Wren will be baptised next week, and next month, when some adults in our congregation will be baptised in preparation for their Confirmation.

We may feel daunted at the thought that we are called by Christ to bring the light of God's justice and righteousness to the world. Remember that call to us at our Baptism, 'Shine as a light in the world to the glory of God the Father'. Like John the Baptist who was flabbergasted at Jesus' request to baptise him, we may well feel inadequate for the task or even downright unworthy.

Yet as Jesus reminds John, God can work through us if we commit ourselves to him in our hearts, taking the conscious decision to make ourselves available in His service. Just as God acted through John the Baptist as he baptised Jesus, sending the Holy Spirit upon him and affirming his ministry, so we too, by offering ourselves to God, can become channels of his grace in the world today.

And, as we look around the world and its darkness and pain at present, we realise how great the needs are and how urgently those living in that darkness need to glimpse the light of Christ and hear the Good News of His gospel which points us to life and not to destruction. Every step we can take to do this whether it is helping those trapped in despair, fear or hatred in our local community or campaigning for justice and compassion for the vulnerable at a higher level, can help bring the light of Christ to illuminate the darkness and show the way from being trapped to freedom.

To do this, we have to trust God. I'd like to end with the words of Minnie Louise Haskins the academic and poet whose words from her poem 'The Gate of the Year' are often used when we face times of darkness as well as at the start of the New Year.

And 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.'

So I went forth, and finding the Hand of God, trod gladly into the night. And He led me towards the hills and the breaking of day in the lone East.

Amen

Canon Daphne Green