

# **Sunday 10 January 2021 - The Baptism of Christ**

## **Sermon Notes**

### **Timkat - the Baptism of Christ in Ethiopia**

- One of the most important celebrations in the Ethiopian Orthodox Church
- Celebrated throughout Ethiopia; major ceremonies in Addis Ababa
- Starts the day before Timkat with processions from all the major churches in the city to the large open space. Climax of each procession is the sacred tablets from each church's altar carried on the head of a priest. Photo 1
- Clip 1 - preparations at St Mark's church
- Procession accompanied by choirs, musicians and dancers - Clip 2
- At the arena there is then an overnight vigil which many people stay for. Photo 2.
- At dawn the Patriarch arrives and there is an elaborate service of blessing around a pool at the centre of the open space - Clip 3
- The climax of the service comes as the tips of the beautiful crosses are dipped into the water and a small boat carrying three candles (the Trinity) is launched onto the water. The rising sun lights up the golden statues of John the Baptist and Jesus at the point of baptism. Photos 3 & 4
- Holy water from the pool is then sprayed onto the waiting crowds. Photo 5
- The service continues with reading, chanting, a sermon and address by the Patriarch before the processions re-assemble for the return journey to the churches later in the day
- While this is happening in the centre of the city, similar celebrations take place around local churches, all with huge crowds

### **Why is Timkat so important in Ethiopia, but the Baptism of Christ so little regarded here?**

- Arguably Ethiopia has it right and we have it wrong
- Probably reflects the way in which the celebration of Christmas in the UK is so extreme that any other nearby festival is almost bound to be marginalised
- That's a shame because there is much to be learnt from the Baptism

### **The Baptism of Christ in the Gospels**

- Our reading today is from Mark, almost certainly the earliest of the Gospels
- Mark has no accounts of the birth and infancy of Jesus
- So the Baptism is the first event we come to, after the introductory explanation of who John the Baptist is
- Mark clearly felt there was no need for an account of Jesus' birth, so the whole weight of establishing who Jesus is falls on the Baptism
- One underlying question - why did Jesus need to be baptised at all? John's baptism was for the forgiveness of sins but Jesus was without sin.
- We're not told anywhere (even the exchange in Matthew between John and Jesus hardly brings clarity)
- My own feeling is not that Jesus needed to but that he wanted to, or that he was convinced God wanted him to

- Just as Matthew and Luke gave us the birth narratives to evidence the truth and mystery of the incarnation, so Mark uses the Baptism to point to the incarnation by Jesus aligning himself with humanity and submitting himself to the ritual John the Baptist offered
- In a way this view of the incarnation, with Jesus taking the initiative for himself as a grown, mature man is more striking than the birth of a baby who is necessarily more 'done to' than 'doing'
- A simpler way of approaching this is to suggest that, throughout his ministry, Jesus sought every opportunity to get close to God
- At his Baptism God vindicated that wish with the words that launched him on his ministry - *You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.*

### **The Baptism of Christ and us**

- Listening to this, you may have become restive, worrying about Covid and all the implications of the latest lockdown and restrictions. You may wonder how understanding Jesus' baptism better might help.
- Perhaps it can, based on the two things I've already mentioned: that Jesus came to share in humanity to the full, even that part - the need to be forgiven - from which he was exempt; and that in submitting himself to baptism he came closer to God and was honoured by him.
- God sent Jesus into the world, not just in his own time but now. Jesus participated in humanity, and still does. In this time of crisis, he is no more than an arm's length away, ready as always to take our hand, give us comfort and encouragement, and offer us hope. We have only to believe and ask.
- And that's not all - if our earnest desire is always to get closer to God and to understand his will for us, and if we pursue that aim determinedly, as Jesus did, we may expect to hear those words also - *You are my child, my beloved; with you I am well pleased.*

JRE / 6.1.21

