



Parish of Finchampstead and California

THOUGHT FOR THE DAY

4-9 January 2021

INTRODUCTION

This week our readings look forward to the start of Jesus' ministry with his baptism by John, the event we celebrate next Sunday. Before returning to John and Jesus at that time, we hear Luke's unique account of Jesus on the verge of maturity. As usual the Thoughts will be based principally on the text in bold type.

MONDAY - Luke 2:41-52

⁴¹ Now every year his parents went to Jerusalem for the festival of the Passover. ⁴² And when he was twelve years old, they went up as usual for the festival. ⁴³ When the festival was ended and they started to return, the boy Jesus stayed behind in Jerusalem, but his parents did not know it.

⁴⁴ Assuming that he was in the group of travellers, they went a day's journey. Then they started to look for him among their relatives and friends. ⁴⁵ When they did not find him, they returned to Jerusalem to search for him. ⁴⁶ After three days they found him in the temple, sitting among the teachers, listening to them and asking them questions. ⁴⁷ And all who heard him were amazed at his understanding and his answers. ⁴⁸ When his parents saw him they were astonished; and his mother said to him, 'Child, why have you treated us like this? Look, your father and I have been searching for you in great anxiety.' ⁴⁹ **He said to them, 'Why were you searching for me? Did you not know that I must be in my Father's house?'** ⁵⁰ **But they did not understand what he said to them.** ⁵¹ Then he went down with them and came to Nazareth, and was obedient to them. His mother treasured all these things in her heart.

⁵² And Jesus increased in wisdom and in years, and in divine and human favour.

Thought for the day

As in the Christmas story itself, here we come again across the intersection between the human and the divine. The setting is the important Passover festival in Jerusalem following which, it seems, Jesus felt a calling by God to spend more time at the Temple. Not surprisingly, in light of what had gone before and what was to come, Jesus considered his Father's will (v49) to be more important than the anxiety of his parents (v48). For many people there may be a similar tension between their Christian faith and the expectations of close family or friends. Although Jesus' teaching sometimes seems uncompromising (for example Mark 10:29-30), we might also note that today's reading ends with him returning home obediently with his parents (v51).

TUESDAY - Matthew 3:1-6

¹ In those days John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness of Judea, proclaiming, ² **'Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.'** ³ This is the one of whom the prophet Isaiah spoke when he said, 'The voice of one crying out in the wilderness: "Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight."' "

⁴ Now John wore clothing of camel's hair with a leather belt around his waist, and his food was locusts and wild honey. ⁵ Then the people of Jerusalem and all Judea were going out to him, and all the region along the Jordan, ⁶ **and they were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins.**

Thought for the day

Some 20 years later John the Baptist took on the mantle of the OT prophets: not only in what he wore and ate (v4), but in his desert location, well away from conventional religion. His message of repentance, of turning back to God (v2), was just like theirs had been. And he was effective - people came to see and hear him, confessed their sins and were baptised (v5-6). Clearly God was with him. If we hold on to that idea of God being with us, who knows what unlikely things we might achieve.

WEDNESDAY - Matthew 3:7-10

⁷ But when he saw many Pharisees and Sadducees coming for baptism, he said to them, 'You brood of vipers. Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come?' **⁸ Bear fruit worthy of repentance.** ⁹ Do not presume to say to yourselves, "We have Abraham as our ancestor"; for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham. ¹⁰ Even now the axe is lying at the root of the trees; every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.

Thought for the day

John's preaching against the religious leaders is intemperate in the way we might expect of a prophet - brood of vipers (v7) is quite a strong insult. But he is trying to change their understanding of what God wants: not a reliance on their heritage, however distinguished (v9), but lives transformed by recognition of their need for God's forgiveness for sins (v8). Status, income, education, intellect - none of them secure for us preferential treatment from God, as Jesus made very clear in the parable of the Pharisee and the tax-collector (Luke 18:9-14).

THURSDAY - Matthew 3:11-12

¹¹ 'I baptize you with water for repentance, but one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to carry his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. ¹² His winnowing-fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing-floor and will gather his wheat into the granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire.'

Thought for the day

John's deference to Jesus might remind us of his mother Elizabeth's deference to Mary (Luke 1:42-45). The contrast is indeed stark - John's ministry was striking and effective, but was merely a prelude to what Jesus would do. Whereas John warned everyone of the need for repentance, Jesus would 'baptise' (perhaps 'drench people') with the Holy Spirit (v11), but also participate in God's judgement, the sifting of the wheat from the chaff (v12). John didn't, and we shouldn't, underestimate the power of Jesus.

FRIDAY - Matthew 3:13-17

¹³ Then Jesus came from Galilee to John at the Jordan, to be baptized by him. ¹⁴ John would have prevented him, saying, 'I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?' ¹⁵ But Jesus answered him, 'Let it be so now; for it is proper for us in this way to fulfil all righteousness.' Then he consented. **¹⁶ And when Jesus had been baptized, just as he came up from the water, suddenly the heavens were opened to him and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and alighting on him. ¹⁷ And a voice from heaven said, 'This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased.'**

Thought for the day

Matthew, Mark and Luke offer subtly different accounts of the various elements of Jesus' baptism. Matthew has the revelation of the heavens opening and the descent of the Holy Spirit visible only to him (v16). On the other hand God's voice appears to announce who Jesus is to everyone (v17), though we're not told that anyone heard or understood it. Whatever the precise detail it's clear that God is affirming Jesus' significance ('my Son, the Beloved'), and his satisfaction with Jesus' life to date ('I am well pleased'). Thus Jesus is commissioned for what lies ahead, and it's no surprise that his first task is to confront and outflank the Devil (4:1-11).

SATURDAY - John 1:32-39

³² And John testified, 'I saw the Spirit descending from heaven like a dove, and it remained on him.

³³ I myself did not know him, but the one who sent me to baptize with water said to me, "He on whom you see the Spirit descend and remain is the one who baptizes with the Holy Spirit." ³⁴ **And I myself have seen and have testified that this is the Son of God.'**

³⁵ The next day John again was standing with two of his disciples, ³⁶ and as he watched Jesus walk by, he exclaimed, 'Look, here is the Lamb of God!' ³⁷ The two disciples heard him say this, and they followed Jesus. ³⁸ When Jesus turned and saw them following, he said to them, 'What are you looking for?' They said to him, 'Rabbi' (which translated means Teacher), 'where are you staying?' ³⁹ He said to them, 'Come and see.' They came and saw where he was staying, and they remained with him that day. It was about four o'clock in the afternoon.

Thought for the day

John's Gospel takes a rather different approach to Jesus' baptism from the other Gospels, not referring to it directly but through the testimony of the Baptist (v32-33); it is he who announces the descent of the Holy Spirit on Jesus and that he is the Son of God (v33-34). From this point we immediately hear of the transition from the Baptist to Jesus as the more prominent teacher when two of John's disciples transfer their allegiance to him (v37-39). John the Baptist's work is not finished but, from the point of view of the earliest Christians, his principal task of setting the scene for the ministry of Jesus, the Lamb of God (v35), was now successfully achieved. Perhaps each of us should consider whether our most important task is, like John, simply to point others to Jesus.

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