



The Right Reverend Michael Perham

A PASTORAL LETTER FROM BISHOP MICHAEL (extended version)

to be read in the churches and chapels of the Diocese of Gloucester on 8 January 2012

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ:

At this New Year I greet you and wish you and all within our diocesan family a year in which, with all the challenges that face our society, we shall richly experience God's blessing on our world and on our lives. Today, on this First Sunday of Epiphany, Christians celebrate the Baptism of Jesus in the River Jordan. St Mark, in his gospel, describes the event very briefly, but there is no doubt that it was of great significance for Jesus, certainly a moment when his vocation clarified. Perhaps it was the moment when there was a leap in his understanding of who he was.

In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. And just as he was coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on him. And a voice came from heaven, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased."

It was a moment of revelation - and revelation is what Epiphany is all about. People are more familiar with the revelation of who Jesus was to the wise men from the East and, of course, Epiphany is about their journey and their kneeling before the infant Jesus and presenting their gifts. But Epiphany is also about the other ways in which, at the beginning of his ministry, Jesus revealed who he was and how the glory of God was hidden within him - in turning water into wine, in calling disciples who responded without delay, and, today, in his Baptism by John in the Jordan.

I want to take the opportunity to invite each one of us to reflect on our own Baptism. Whether or not you can recall the day of your Baptism, it was a unique moment in your Christian journey. It may have been long ago as a baby only weeks or months old. In that case you cannot recall your Baptism in the sense of summoning up a memory. Or it may have been later in life and you may have a very special memory of it. But, either way, it is important to "remember" it in the sense of celebrating what it means and exploring what it commits you to.

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Christian Baptism is rich in many-layered meaning. We read about it in the New Testament, where, in the Acts of the Apostles, we are given several descriptions of Baptism, such as the occasion in Acts Chapter 19 when Paul baptised twelve new Christians in Ephesus and the Holy Spirit came upon them. The New Testament letters also have some important things to say about what Baptism means. The First Letter of Peter speaks of our being saved through water and Paul in Romans Chapter 6 spells out the important truth that in Baptism it is as if we are buried with Christ and raised with him to the new life. Yes, in the water of Baptism there is the invitation into a relationship with Jesus Christ, there is talk of new birth as well as of dying to the old and rising with Christ, there is the calling down of the Holy Spirit to abide within you and there is incorporation into a new family, the Church.

I want to ask you to reflect on what your Baptism means, or might mean, for you, and to do so not just today but as a theme running through 2012. There is a world of difference between saying "I was baptised once upon a time" and saying "I *am* baptised - it is something I am living and exploring." It's why, in the Church today, we tend, more than we used to, to gather people at the font to renew their baptismal vows. We need to be conscious of our baptism shaping our lives.

I want to ask you to do this reflecting and exploring against the background of a fact that gives me pause for thought. It is this. The statistics for the Diocese of Gloucester show an increase in church attendance and in commitment to active Christian discipleship by joining parish electoral rolls, but a continuing decline in the number of people being baptized and confirmed. In other words people are joining us, but not to the extent of making the commitment that Baptism and Confirmation imply. I suspect that one of the reasons for this is that we do not hold out the invitation to them enough or make available to them sufficient opportunities to think through their faith and to explore commitment.

I want to ask your church community over the next few months to explore the place of Baptism in your life together as you meet in church councils or house groups or in conversation with the members of your own church. You might shape that exploration around questions such as these five.

First, are we doing everything we can to encourage people of every age to come to Baptism? We need to talk it up, make it easy for people to seek it (though not so easy that we fail to look for commitment to Christ and to the life of the Church), and ensure it has a high profile in the life of each church community.

Second, are we offering teaching for those exploring the Christian faith and preparation for those seeking Baptism? Whether Alpha, Emmaus or one of the other national courses, or something much more local and home-grown, we need in every community well-publicised opportunities for people to sign up to learn more about faith and to be prepared for Baptism and Confirmation.

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Third, are we inviting those who have been baptised but not confirmed to renew their commitment through Confirmation? There are many unconfirmed teenagers and adults in our congregations, coming to the table at the Eucharist to receive a blessing, rather than to share in Holy Communion. Some of them are not ready for Confirmation; they have thought it through and this is not for them the moment. But there are others who need gentle invitation and challenge. We need to create in each community an expectation that there will frequently be people preparing for Confirmation with the interest and encouragement of the community.

Fourth, are we providing opportunities for those who have experienced a leap forward in their discipleship to renew their baptismal commitment? The Church provides material for the Renewal of Baptismal Commitment for those who, having been baptised and confirmed some years before, but who come to a deeper faith and following of Christ and want an opportunity to celebrate that publicly. In my experience this material is not often offered or used and that, I think, is a pity. We could be much more imaginative about making it available.

Fifth, finally, are we celebrating Baptism services in such a way that people have every opportunity to meet Jesus Christ? Although a church cannot be constantly reviewing its practice, occasionally it is good to ask whether the way we celebrate Baptism is as helpful as it could be, both for those being baptised and for those who witness the Baptism. Is it possible to make the occasion more welcoming, more inclusive and a more powerful experience of God's grace?

If we all take these questions seriously, I believe we will see Baptism becoming more significant for us as individuals and communities, and faith and discipleship deepened.

In most of our church buildings, what first confronts you when you enter is the baptismal font. It's usually there by the door partly to express the fact that Baptism is the means by which we enter the Church in the sense of the community of those who follow Jesus, the Body of Christ. But it also there - at its very best facing us as we walk in - to remind us every time we come that we are among the baptised and to call us back to our baptismal commitment. My hope is that this year will be rather like the font, calling us back to the truth that can have us saying with a real sense of its importance "I *am* baptised."

To any who hear this and who have not themselves been baptised, I ask: Is this the moment when you should explore this step? If it is, please grasp the moment and speak to your priest or someone else in your church community who accompany you through a process leading to Baptism.. And, if you are one of those baptised long ago, but who would like to renew your commitment, please seize the opportunity and begin a conversation today about how and when that might happen.

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Of course beyond the font is the table, the altar. One of the privileges that follow from our Baptism and, in the Anglican way of doing things, from our Confirmation, is our participation in the Eucharist, sharing in the consecrated bread and wine, receiving a share in the life of Christ, being renewed by the Holy Spirit. Here is an amazing means of grace and I want to encourage those who have not yet been admitted to Communion to take the step that will draw them into an experience that will draw them deeper into communion with Jesus.

It's a wonderful truth that we are the brothers and sisters of Jesus Christ of whom his Father said on this day at the Jordan, "You are my beloved Son". God says to us in our baptism and then goes on saying to us as we live out our faith, "You also are among my beloved sons and daughters." What a privilege, worth taking very seriously, worth celebrating!

Michael Glavin:
