

# **Sermon on Sunday 28 January 2024**

## **by Rev. Alan Stewart**

*(Readings: Acts 19. 1-7 & Mark 1. 4-11)*

### **A Whole Life (The Baptism of Jesus)**

You can tell a lot about a person from the contents of their rubbish bin.

Archaeologists and sociologists will tell you that a great way to paste together a portrait of a person or a society, is to look at what they throw away.

Journalists and forensic experts will tell you the same. Want to know how people tick, what they get up to behind closed doors? Inspect the garbage.

In the recent storm, a few people got to inspect the garbage of St Andrew's when high winds flung the contents of the recycling bins all over the churchyard. What they discovered were a great many beer kegs, beer bottles and wine bottles. Now, before you jump to conclusions, these were in fact the empties from the concert bar a few nights previously, and not the remnants of a clergy booze binge!

Rubbish, I think, is a good analogy for what we sometimes call 'sin'. Sin is the stuff of our lives that we need to throw away; all that's unhealthy and unnecessary. It's everything that's unfit for the purpose of living our best life; our whole life, the life we were made for.

And in our reading today, we hear that a whole city and surrounding district turn up at the River Jordan to wash away their own personal rubbish in the waters of baptism. They've come in response to the message of John who insisted they 'repent and be baptised'. 'Let go your rubbish,' he says, 'make a clean start; receive the forgiveness of God'. And they come in their droves to lie down in those waters, to leave their shame and their guilt and their past in the river, and to step out freed to start living the whole life they were made for.

And then, one day in the queue, John spots someone he knows, his cousin. And at that moment, something suddenly clicks. This cousin is none other than the One; the Chosen One he's been preparing everyone for; the Messiah no less. And understandably in other gospel accounts, John's confused: 'But *You* should be baptising me,' he says.

And he's got a point. What does this 'perfect' man have to wash away in the river of repentance?

Call me a heretic, but the whole sinless-ness of Jesus has never made a lot of sense to me. Isn't part of being fully human to grow through the things we get wrong? I struggle, if I'm honest, to relate to a Jesus that didn't say or do things he later regretted.

And here, typically, he's found among those who are dragging their rubbish to the water's edge, joining them in that river, and letting go a past in order to embrace the future he was made for.

Then, just as he breaks through those waters of rebirth, and steps out into the air of a new world, something extraordinary happens. The heavens, we're told, open, and the Spirit of God descends like a dove and Jesus hears divine words of blessing; 'This is my Son, the beloved; with you I am so pleased, so proud'.

Do more powerful words exist?

It's these words of his Father that Jesus would immediately take with him into the desert of temptation. Forty grueling days of heat and hunger, cold and confusion. Forty days of painful self-discovery; forty days of working out what exactly his life was for, what God was asking of him.

The Baptism of Jesus is his inauguration into his unique vocation.

And here's the thing; we all have a unique vocation. It's not just doctors and priests; every soul has a calling, and our highest calling is to be who we were made to be; our whole self. And God always works with the stuff of our lives; our story, our personality, our strengths and weaknesses, our passions, to forge that vocation. And, always, we begin where we are, with doing what we are currently called to do with commitment and compassion.

What's your vocation? If you're employed or unemployed or retired, start there. Pray that God will use you where you are, and use all the things you're good at. Maybe part of that vocation is to pray, or to listen, to offer practical help, to make

art, to offer hospitality, to speak truth and challenge, to care for other creatures... What's your vocation?

Many of us who have been baptised (in a font probably, rather than a river), won't remember it because we were infants. Some of us will remember, perhaps, that other rite of passage we call Confirmation, where we chose this faith as our own, where we are con-firmed (strengthened) by the Holy Spirit as the Bishop lays hands upon us, speaks our name and prays blessing.

I was confirmed late in life and undercover. Rachel and I had started leading a small congregation in North West London, when we discovered that in order to do that we should ideally be confirmed. So, we were surreptitiously taken off to another church to do it on the quiet, only to find that members of our own church were visiting that day and our cover was blown.

The priest we worked with at the time helped us to think of confirmation not as just another hoop to jump through but as another step of commitment to our calling to become who we were made to be. It was a moment of humbling ourselves, of asking for strength and vision for the next step.

These moments, these rites of passage, are so important. I was listening to a podcast recently where a young Irishman was saying how his generation had broken free of the influence of the Church, but now he felt that that generation had lost something in their emancipation. They'd lost connection, community, a still place to reflect on life and a mechanism for letting go of the rubbish and receiving forgiveness.

One of my favourite quotes is by Frederick Buechner: "Listen to your life. See it for the fathomless mystery it is. In the boredom and pain of it, no less than in the excitement and gladness: touch, taste, smell your way to the holy and hidden heart of it, because in the last analysis all moments are key moments, and life itself is grace."

So, let this be a key moment, a con-firming moment where we ask the Spirit for what we need. Take a moment to look at the sheet you were given (words on the screen) and ask yourself which one of these prayers speaks for me.

*Lord, you have always given strength for the coming day; and though I am weak, today I believe.*

*Lord, you have always given peace for the coming day; and though of anxious heart, today I believe.*

*Lord, you have always kept me safe in trials; and now, tired as I am, today I believe.*

*Lord, you have always marked the road for the coming day; and though it may be hidden, today I believe.*

*Lord, you have always lightened this darkness of mine; and though the night is here, today I believe.*

*Lord, you have always spoken when time was ripe; and though you may be silent now, today I believe.*

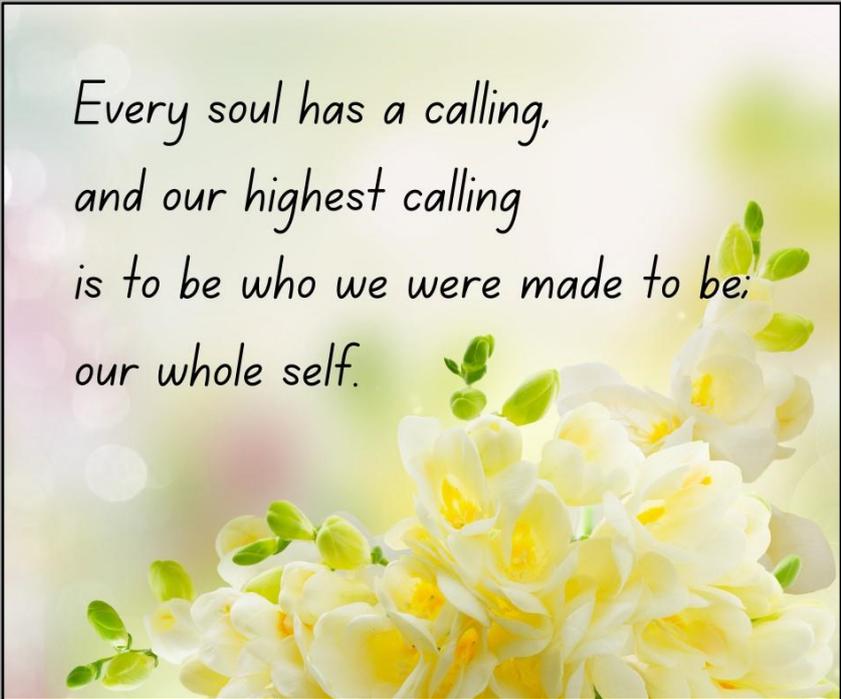
I invite you to say these together with me, and when it comes to the line that speaks for you, to stand for that line, and then sit, as a way of marking this key moment.

If you haven't been baptised and you'd like to be, we can do that privately or publically at the end of the service, just say.

Finally, a blessing, the same blessing Jesus received at that key moment in his life.

'God says...' (I invite you to silently say your name)... 'You are my child, the beloved, with you I am so pleased, so proud'.

Amen



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and our highest calling  
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our whole self.*