

Many if not most of us who are sharing in this service will I'm sure have queued up recently to be vaccinated. After doing this myself last month, it struck me that those queues were a bit like the queue to be baptised by John the Baptist that Jesus must have joined on the day that's described in the reading and song that we've just heard. We were queuing in the hope of being set free by vaccination from the risk of covid-19, and the people in the queue with Jesus were there in the hope of being set free by baptism from the guilt of their wrongdoing. But when Jesus was baptised, we're told that the message that came to him was not about being set free from guilt. Instead, we read: "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'" (*Mark 1:10-11*).

It's those two little sentences that I'm going to reflect on now. What do they tell us about Jesus? Firstly, "You are my son, the beloved." Those words are often thought of as a reference to the divinity of Jesus, but I'd like to suggest that they can also be seen as a sign of his humanity. Whenever we pray "Our Father", we imply that we humans are all daughters and sons of God, and beloved by God; and I believe that's also implied on the very first page of the Bible, where we read that "God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them" (*Genesis 1:27*). God says to every one of us "You are my child, my beloved" - as our first song this morning reminded us with its words "your living likeness still we bear, though marred, dishonoured, disobeyed". Being children of God, made in God's image and beloved by God, is a status we share with Jesus. He was fully human.

We turn now to the second of the two sentences that Mark quotes God as saying to Jesus: "With you I am well pleased". Those words are translated "In you I take delight" in some versions of the Bible (e.g. *REB*); and they echo a sentence that God is quoted as saying in the book of Isaiah in the Old Testament - a sentence that reads: "This is my servant, whom I uphold, my chosen in whom my soul delights" (*Isaiah 42:1*). The prophet didn't put a name to the servant, but he described what they would do in the passage "He was despised and rejected" (*Isaiah 53:3*), which many of us know from Handel's "Messiah". And the way in which God's words delighting in the servant are echoed in the story of Jesus' baptism reminds us that Jesus was called to identify himself with that servant, who the prophet had said was to be despised and rejected, to suffer and die, in order to bring healing even to those who rejected him. And, of course, Jesus accepted that role of servant.

What difference does all this about Jesus being both the son and the servant of God make to us? For me, the answer lies in six verses in St. Paul's letter to the Christians in Philippi - verses which have recently become quite special to me, as I've told many of you before. Here they are:

"Christ Jesus ... , though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death—even death on a cross. Therefore God also highly exalted him and gave him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bend, in heaven and on the earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father" (*Philippians 2:5b-12*).

One thing that makes these words special to me is that Paul is thought to have quoted them from a hymn that was already familiar in the early church when he wrote the letter, which he probably did in about 60 AD. So that description of Jesus could be the very earliest description we have, dating from a good few years closer to his lifetime than even the earliest of the gospels. It could be what the very first Christians believed about Jesus, well before they held the complicated doctrines which we find in statements such as the Nicene Creed. And the older I get, the more I come to feel that the later theologians who came up with some of those doctrines were claiming to know more about God than our human minds are capable of grasping. Can we know, and do we need to know, any more about what God's like than the three words "God is love?" And do we need to know any more about Jesus than the first Christians did? Certainly we shouldn't worry if our faith is as simple as theirs.

The passage Paul quotes begins, like God's words at Jesus' baptism, by reminding us that Jesus was God's son; it speaks of him as being in the form or image of God – that image in which all humans are created. The passage then brings out the other picture of Jesus that God's words at his baptism bring to mind – the picture of him as God's faithful servant. For the passage says that he “did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave ... and became obedient to the point of death.” We act as if we were equal with God whenever we live as if what we want is at least as important as what God wants; but Jesus accepted the role of a slave - a servant totally obedient to God. And therefore, the passage goes on to say, “therefore God also highly exalted him and gave him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bend, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father”.

So that's the answer to my question of a few moments ago “What difference does all this about Jesus being the son and the servant of God make to us?” The difference it makes is that it means we should accept Jesus as our supreme Lord. For the first-generation Christians who we believe joined in saying or singing those words “Jesus Christ is Lord”, this meant that the Roman emperor was not their supreme Lord – and some of them were martyred when they refused to worship that emperor as divine. And there may be times when accepting Jesus as our supreme Lord will mean we have to defy **our** government, if what it's doing or tells us to do is in conflict with the teaching and example of Jesus. But that is not all. In every situation in which we find ourselves, our calling to accept Jesus as our supreme Lord means making it our supreme aim to follow his teaching and example - to be “obedient to the point of death” as he was to the commandments to love God with all our being and our neighbours as ourselves.

And we love God when we love our neighbours – that surely is the message of Jesus' parable of the sheep and the goats, when the king says to those who have been loving to those in need that “Anything you did for one of my brothers [and sisters] here ... you did for me” (*Matthew 25:40*). And according to this parable, it is by what we do for those in need that the quality of our lives is to be judged. This, more than assenting to the Nicene Creed, even more than sharing in services of worship, is surely what lies at the heart of obeying Jesus as our supreme Lord. May God help us so to obey. Amen.