

On the Third Sunday of Advent, not so many weeks ago, we had a reading from the Gospel of Luke, chapter 3, verses 7 to 18.

And today we heard Luke Chapter 3, verses 15 – 22.

So the first four verses we heard today should be giving you some *deja va*, since we have already heard quite recently.

As valuable as repetition is for learning, rather than repeat what was said, today we will focus on the end of our Gospel reading, verses 19-22, which is the part where Jesus is actually baptised – which is, after all, the theme of the day!

We might hear the word ‘Baptism’ and think we know what it means, because Baptism is something that is still part of the Christian spiritual life today. But, when it comes to the Bible, it is always important to remember that we are hearing about another time and another culture, and that means that our expectations and what is actually going on often clash.

So let’s start by looking at what John was doing. John the Baptist is calling people to come and be cleansed in the River Jordan. He is inviting them to understand a ritual purification by immersion in water.

Ritual purification and cleansing were a significant part of Jewish religious culture and practice, and remain so for many modern-day observant Jews.

In Hebrew, ritual purification and cleansing rites are called “Mikvah.”

There are Mikvah, or cleansing rituals, for all sorts of things, such as:

after menstruation, after childbirth, after contact with a corpse, and after healing from skin conditions.

We can see in this list that, while there is a spiritual aspect of Mikvah, there is also a sense of practical roots. A lot of Jewish religious laws related to ritual cleanliness have very practical foundations, like washing hands before eating, and keeping kosher.

But Mikvah also had (and has) spiritual significance. In Biblical times the Mikvah was strongly associated with the Temple in Jerusalem, with people

undergoing purification rites before entering sacred spaces or offering sacrifices. Ritual cleansing is also the final step in conversion to Judaism, as well as often being undertaken by a bride before her wedding. In these cases, the cleansing is about rebirth, about washing away anything that is unholy, and of renewing a right relationship with God.

In order for something to actually count as Mikvah, there were some requirements.

Firstly, the water had to be “living water”, that is: water from a natural source that was flowing, not stagnant. So that could be a river, a spring or even rainwater.

Water that was collected in a vessel, like a cistern or pool filled with tap water was not appropriate, unless it was connected in a way that allowed the water to be considered “living” (which is why our Baptismal Fonts are *meant* to be plumbed in such a way that we can release the water and it will flow out into the earth directly rather than to the sewer. For practical reasons, not all of them are plumbed at all).

Another requirement of Mikvah was that the person undergoing the purification must be fully immersed in the water. Everything, including hair and nails, must be submerged. Often they would be required to wash in a more ordinary way before this ritual immersion, so that the water they were ritually immersed in remained clean.

Once immersed, the person was considered spiritually renewed and could return to community and religious life.

Knowing this, we can see the baptism that John is calling people to follows the requirements of Mikvah. He is immersing people in “living water” – the flowing river Jordan – to make them spiritually clean and to renew their relationship with God.

The River Jordan is not just any body of water. This was THE body of water that the ancient Israelites had to cross to enter the promised land. After spending 40 years wandering in the wilderness, crossing the River Jordan marked the fulfilment of God’s promise to their ancestors: the beginning of a new life of blessing, and a new relationship with God.

So to be baptised in the River Jordan, to be immersed in it and then brought forth out of it, marked a spiritual transition that echoed the

historical transition. It was to leave behind the old life of sin and to enter a new life full of hope and new possibilities.

We can see in John how ideas of both The Promise Land and of Mikvah (ritual cleansing) carry over from Jewish faith and practise into Christianity. Because what John is doing is old, but it is also new – he is emphasising repentance and forgiveness in anticipation of the coming Messiah. That wasn't the emphasis before.

Enter: Jesus.

Jesus comes to John and asks to be baptised. It's utterly ridiculous to think that the Messiah needs to undergo any sort of cleansing or purification rite, that he needs to wash away anything unholy, or be renewed. But he undergoes the ritual the same as the others. In Matthew's Gospel, John objects, saying that it should be the other way around, it should be Christ baptising *him*. But Jesus insists on solidarity with humanity, and he insists that John is perfectly fit for the task. It's all out of order, a sign of the topsy-turvy world that Jesus ushers in.

Despite John thinking Jesus' request is ridiculous, is the wrong way around, he does baptise Jesus, and it is in the way a rebirth, because up to this point, we can assume Jesus has been living a reasonably normal life. And yet here we see Jesus rise from the tomb of the water, and immediately we are graced with a revelation of God. We hear in Luke's Gospel that "heaven was opened and the Holy Spirit descended on him in bodily form like a dove. And a voice came from heaven: 'You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased.'"

It begs the question – was the Holy Spirit not upon him previously? We do know, at least, that this particular Mikvah, this moment of ritual cleansing, isn't just one of many moments of renewal. It is a cleansing that marks a distinct change in Jesus' life: his life of ministry begins.

In this, Jesus' baptism is less recognisable as a Mikvah, and more akin to the Christian rite of Baptism – a one-time event that invited the Holy Spirit to enter, sets the Christian life in motion, and which marks the person out, as Christ was, as a Son (or Daughter) of God, whom God loves, and in whom God is well pleased.