

Acts 19.1-7; Mark 1.4-11 “You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.”

I wonder what the best gift was that you ever received? If you take a moment to think about it, is there something that stands out for you - perhaps a surprise, or getting something that you'd wanted for a very long time.

When I was about 13, my dad decorated my bedroom for me. My brother and I had gone to spend a week with our grandparents, and when we got home my bedroom had been transformed into the purple delight that I'd been wanting for years - purple carpet, purple chandelier, purple curtains... to my young self it was amazing and I loved it! Over the years I'd shared a room with my older brother and then my younger sister, and this was the first time I'd had a room that was really mine, and it felt really special.

Gifts have the ability to be transformative. There's great joy in giving someone something that you know they'll love, but even better is when a gift is able to be truly significant, to shape a person or change the course of their life.

Sometimes we don't even know when we give these kinds of gifts. Perhaps you give some encouragement or make a suggestion that sparks a passion. Perhaps you say something casually that unbeknownst to you takes root in the other person's mind and inspires them. Maybe you give the gift of listening, and make someone feel valued and heard in a way that they needed. It could be that you have been the recipient of a gift of this sort yourself.

So I wonder, what is the best gift you have ever received?

In today's gospel reading we hear about Jesus being baptised. Mark describes how Jesus is baptised in the river Jordan, and when he comes up out of the water, Jesus sees the Holy Spirit descending on him like a dove. Maybe what Jesus saw was something like what we have depicted in our stained glass window. Whatever the exact experience, it was certainly dramatic. We hear that the heavens are torn apart, and the voice of God is heard speaking. So at the moment of Jesus' baptism, he receives the Spirit.

Now, if we think about it for a moment, there is something odd about Jesus being baptised at all. If I were to ask you what the purpose of baptism today is,

you might say things like: to join the church family, to turn away from sin, to be marked as a Christian, to do what Jesus told us to do. But none of those things were true for Jesus. He didn't need to repent of sins, he wasn't a Christian, and the church hadn't started yet. But he was baptised in order to show us the way, and to share our experience. And in one huge way Jesus' baptism was the same as ours - in the receiving of the Spirit. This modelled what would happen for all Christians in the subsequent millenia.

We see it in the reading from the book of Acts, when Paul asks some new believers if they had received the Spirit. They respond not, because they hadn't heard of it, or realised that John was simply paving the way for Jesus, but when Paul explains and they are baptised in Jesus' name, they receive the Spirit.

Now, it is true that we don't tend to have dramatic experiences today. **At the 10 o'clock service**/In a minute, when we baptise McCauley, I don't expect us to see the heavens ripped open and a dove descending, nor do I think we will hear God speak to us from heaven. But, that doesn't make it any less significant. Receiving the Spirit is still something that will happen, even if it isn't so immediately tangible in that moment.

The Spirit is something that God promises, as the way of being intimately with us throughout life. For God isn't only in church, thank goodness! We don't leave God behind when we leave this place today. Instead God is always with us because the Spirit dwells within us, and we find God in different ways and in different places, however the Spirit speaks to our hearts.

Baptism is an outward sign of an inward grace. A public and visible declaration that this person belongs to God, that this person is held in the palm of God's hand, and is cherished and loved beyond measure. Baptism is a sign that God is with us once again, in a new giving and receiving of the Spirit, which is Godself. This is a gift beyond all gifts.

Today we are also celebrating Godparent Sunday, and this is one of the tasks of a godparent, to teach their godchild about how God is with them. To model what it is to live a life shaped by the knowledge and love of God. To be a guide on the path of learning to listen to the Spirit, of exploring the ways that you find God most clearly.

This too is a great gift, to be a godparent or godchild, and to share with each other how the Spirit moves in your soul. Listen to the whispers of God wherever you

find them, and know that this is the gift of baptism, that God has given godself in this wondrous way.

So I wonder anew, what the best gift you've ever received might be? How has it shaped you? How does it impact your life and the lives of those around you? How might you share the joy of your greatest gift with your neighbour?

Jesus was baptised so that we might follow in his footsteps, and know God for ourselves. With this Spirit in our hearts we hear the voice from heaven echoing to each of us, 'You are my child, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.'

What a gift indeed!

Amen.