

Sermon: Ann

So here we are less than three weeks after Christmas; the chocolates not finished; signs of the Christmas tree still on the carpet; the New Year's resolution hovering on the brink of disappearing! Already Luke is wanting to get on with the story of this amazing man whose birth we celebrated such a short time ago. And where better to start than with another new beginning? The baptism of Jesus and the start of his ministry.

John spoke with authority and there were those who followed him. But he knew that he was not the one sent by God to redeem the people. John knew that there was a greater one to follow him and that was his cousin Jesus. And indeed, Jesus was the person who came to redeem not just the Israelites but everyone.

The baptism was the defining moment. But the mission of Jesus was identified a little later when he was praying. Jesus did a lot of praying, talking to his father and he heard God tell him that he

was pleased. Wouldn't it be wonderful if we heard God say to us:

Well done, I'm pleased with you!

But there is the anomaly of why Jesus, who was sinless, was baptized anyway. There are several thoughts about this:

- ✚ That he was acknowledging the effect of human sin
- ✚ To show God's approval of John
- ✚ To be a sign of unity with those outside the Jewish Law
- ✚ Some think that Jesus had been a disciple of John and this was the beginning of his own ministry

Perhaps the reason that Jesus was baptized was that he was showing solidarity with us.

The people who went to the River Jordan to be baptized by John were ordinary people living a life of hardship and pain. They were generally poor, ruled by an occupying power and even their own leaders in Judaism did nothing to make life easier for them insisting that impossible rules were kept. Many

would be ill and would die from disease which today is controlled. What did John offer them?

He couldn't change their lives materially; he questioned authority and ended up being executed. Perhaps he gave a glimpse into another way of life and this would only be fulfilled in Jesus. I like to think that Jesus was baptized to show his love and concern for each one of us. Like the people who went to the river, we come with all our problems and burdens and that is where Jesus is, now as then.

We have survived the excesses of Christmas, with its magic, mystery, goodwill and goodness and listened to the tender story of the baby born in the manger but usually that doesn't last and we are plunged back into the harshness and uncertainty of everyday life. For Christ too the euphoria was to pass and he was tempted as we are.

I don't know about you but I decided not to make any resolutions for the New Year because by this stage of January I

would probably have broken them anyway! But I would like to think that I will try harder to follow those two commandments which are so easy to say and so difficult to fulfil. Love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul and with all your might and love your neighbour as yourself. Said in about six seconds! But it will take more than my lifetime to get anywhere near achieving this. And I know I can't do it on my own, only with the help of Christ and his abiding love.

Here is a story called THE ANGEL'S NEW YEAR GIFT BY

EMILIE POULSSON Two little boys were playing one day when an Angel suddenly appeared and said: "I have been sent to give you New Year presents." He handed each child a package, and in an instant was gone.

Carl and Philip opened the packages and found in them two beautiful books, with pages as pure and white as snow.

A while later the Angel came again to the boys. "I have brought you each another book and will take the first ones back to the Father who sent them to you."

"May I keep mine a little longer?" asked Philip. "I'd like to paint something on the last leaf that lies open." "No," said the Angel; "I must take it just as it is."

"I wish that I could look through mine just once," said Carl; "I have only seen one page at a time, for when the leaf turns over it sticks fast, and I can never open the book at more than one place each day."

"You shall look at your book," said the Angel, "and Philip, at his."

The boys looked in surprise. Could these be the same books given to them a year ago? Where were the clean, white pages?

Some pages were decorated with gorgeous colours and still others with a rainbow of dazzling brightness. Yet even on the most beautiful of the pages there were ugly blots and scratches

too. Carl and Philip looked at the Angel. "Who did this?" they asked. The Angel, smiling at the two little boys said,

"See, Philip, rainbow colours blossomed on this page when you let the baby have your toys; and this pretty bird, that looks as if it were singing with all its might, is there because you tried to be kind, instead of quarrelling." "But what made these blots?" asked Philip.

"Well," said the Angel sadly; "All these blots and scratches that look so ugly, in both your books, were made when you were naughty. Each brilliant thing in your books came on its pages when you were good."

"Oh, if we could only have the books again!" said Carl and Philip.

"That cannot be," said the Angel. "They must now go back to the Father, but I have brought each of you a new one. Perhaps you can make these more beautiful than the other books."

So saying, he vanished, but each boy held in his hand a new book open at the first page, entitled, "For the New Year."

We have the chance each and every day to begin a clean page so as we think about the baptism of Jesus and as he stands beside each one of us whatever life throws at us, may we be a work in progress in following him more closely.