

# **Baptism: The lodestar of love**

*MUC@10, 22 February 2026*

*Alison Sampson, reflecting on Matthew 3:16-4:11*

*Today we are baptising a child. I will use his name in the service. However, because this text goes on the website, in the following I'll call him 'Ben', Hebrew for 'son.'*

Jesus said, 'Let the children come to me, and do not stop them; for it is to such as these that the kingdom of God belongs.' Many flocked to him, bringing sick kids, ratty kids, pushy and disobedient kids; kids with disabilities and babies who cried all night. Ordinary kids, fearfully and wonderfully made.

Jesus didn't single out super-special children. He did not say that the kingdom belongs to kids who are infant prodigies, or squeaky clean, or nice and polite. He didn't demand that they be obedient, or healthy, or well trained in religious practice. Instead, he welcomed all children, and all who are like children; for it is to such as these that the kingdom of God already belongs.

Some say this is because kids are hyper-holy. They talk about the innocence of babies, the spirituality of toddlers, and young children chatting easily with God. Certainly, many children show a deep spirituality, but this is not the reason the kingdom is theirs.

There's a lovely story about a boy called Samuel. He's woken one night by God calling to him, but he doesn't recognise the voice. For, and I quote, Samuel 'did not yet know the Lord, and the word of the Lord had not yet been revealed to him.' (1 Samuel 3). He could hear God, but he did not yet know God. Knowing God was something he grew into.

So why does the kingdom belong to children and the childlike?

I suggest it is because they are vulnerable. They rely utterly on others, and in this they model Jesus' own life, ministry, and death. For Jesus emptied himself of power and took on vulnerable human form. He relied absolutely on God for love and guidance, and on the gifts of angels, women and other friends for his needs. He also relied on religious institutions and the state for justice and mercy, although he did not receive them. And so, like far too many children, Jesus bore their violence on his own body, even unto death.

His divinity was indivisible from his humanity, and his humanity was indivisible from his vulnerability.

In the same way, in their utter reliance on family and community for love, in their reliance on others for food, shelter, kindness, education, justice, mercy and safety, every child is an icon of Christ. God's culture belongs to them not because of their inherent loveliness, but because of their vulnerability and need.

This is not to deny that children have spiritual experiences. Many do. Perhaps they sense God's presence through the wind and the waves; perhaps they feel it in the love of others; perhaps, like Samuel, they hear God calling in the night. But for these experiences to be vested with meaning and able to be shared, they need a language and a worldview: and this is where we come in. As a faith community with Christ at its head, we have a priestly role. Like Samuel's mentor Eli, we are called to help others recognise God's voice however it speaks to them, and to listen carefully to what it says.

We perform the rite of baptism, then, to do a few things.

One, to knit us together. As Paul wrote to the Christians in Corinth, 'We were all baptised by one Spirit into one body.' (1 Corinthians 12:13). Through baptism, Ben has become part of the body of Christ and woven into our lives. As his siblings in Christ, we have committed to raise him in the patterns, practices, language and worldview of faith, to walk with him on the journey, and to pay attention when God speaks or acts through him.

Two, we have baptised him that he may be freed from the chains of sin and flooded with the Holy Spirit. As Peter urged, 'Turn to God and be baptised, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ so that your sins may be forgiven. And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.' (Acts 2:37-38).

As much as we wish it were otherwise, Ben has been born into a world where right relationships between God, people and land have been significantly disrupted. We call this disruption sin, and it exerts a destructive power over his life, just as it distorts our own. But through baptism, he has been liberated from these chains and filled with the Holy Spirit's life, which will draw him always towards healing and wholeness. Over the years, he can respond to this pull or reject it, but the compass needle has been set.

To use another wayfinding metaphor, we have baptised Ben to give him a map. In the story of Jesus' testing in the wilderness, many things stand out. Today I draw your attention to just one word: 'If.' 'If you are God's son,'

says the tester, do this, do that. Break the rules of nature and turn stones into bread. Satisfy yourself through your own efforts. Draw attention to yourself; force angels to act. Worship the wrong things and grab that which isn't yours to take.

Each time, Jesus wrestles. The telling of this story is concise, but the struggle is not. For this is not a quick multiple-choice quiz, over in an instant. This is the test that emerges after forty days of wrestling, prayer and fasting as Jesus wonders, 'If ...'

'If I am the son of God ...' he thinks. And perhaps he wonders, Am I really God's son? How can I prove it? What will it take? If I were really God's child, would I be so famished for food, for love, for companionship? Would I hunger so much for healing and acceptance? Would I be more powerful? Would I be more effective? Would I be protected from suffering and harm?

But then he remembers his baptism and the voice which declared his sonship. And perhaps he notices that the affirmation came before he did anything much. Sure, he was born, he had some interesting visitors, his family fled to Egypt then came home again: but in all these things he was just a kid, carried along for the ride. There was nothing the gospel writers thought worth reporting about Jesus himself: no teaching, no healing, no early miracles. Yet at his baptism, the voice declared, 'You are my Son, the beloved; in you I am delighted.'

These words are a lodestar. For with them as his guiding light, Jesus remembers that there is no 'if.' Already, he is God's son. He didn't earn it. He doesn't need prove it. And it doesn't provide a safety net. He might be hungry, suffering, powerless and ineffective, he might be vulnerable, he might be even harmed, but he's still God's beloved; still filled with the Holy Breath. And so he says no to the tester. Three times, the tester asks him to prove himself. Three times, Jesus remembers who and whose he is and says no.

God gives this same lodestar to every one of us, including Ben. For through baptism, Ben has shared in Jesus' baptism and become one with Christ, and so he shares in Christ's sonship and participates in God's delight. As he grows, Ben will at times be confronted by his fears and failures. He will know faith and unfaith; exhaustion and confusion; hunger and tears and sin. Like all of us, there will be times when he is filled with the desire to prove himself. He will want to break the rules of nature and feed himself; he

will want to be a big shot and worship the wrong things. He will yearn to grab that which isn't his to take: and all to test if he is truly beloved.

At every turn, may he be guided by our lodestar: that before he could earn it, indeed before he did anything much, Ben participated in Christ's baptism and was filled with the Holy Spirit. And so God has already claimed him as a beloved son; God is already well pleased with him; and nothing, absolutely nothing can take that away.

In all the twists and turns of life, may Ben and every one of us live into the freedom and fullness of this identity, this joy, God's delight. For in our end is our beginning: the alpha, the omega, the God of love. Thanks be to God: Creator, Redeemer, Sustainer. Amen. Ω