

# worship notes



from the United Reformed Church

Sunday 12<sup>th</sup> January  
The Baptism of the Lord  
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## Introduction

Today we mark Jesus' baptism at the start of his ministry. We've very little material about Jesus' childhood and so we jump, in our Sunday readings, from the visit of the Magi straight into his baptism and public ministry. We like to think of baptism as something the Church does yet, as we read today, it was a rite first offered by Jesus' cousin John the Baptist. John was a fiery preacher who didn't seem to get nuance. He told people what's what; his condemnation of Herod for marrying his sister-in-law led to his death. He divided the wheat from the chaff so it's surprising Jesus went to be baptised. We'll think about why that might be the case, and we'll ponder Isaiah's beautiful words of assurance.

## Call to Worship

With all of creation we come to worship and **raise God a song on high!** We glorify God's unmeasured strength and unbounded love and **raise God a song on high!** At God's voice the clouds come, the thunder roars and torrents fall, and **we raise God a song on high!** As creation quakes in God's presence we know that the voice which sets the planets spinning also speaks, in gentle breath, with the peace which sustains us and so **we raise God a song on high!**

## Prayers of Approach, Confession and Grace

You tell us, O Most High, not to be afraid,  
to trust in Your redemption,  
to hear You call us by name,  
and to know we'll not be overwhelmed by flood  
nor consumed by flame.  
For these promises we thank you.

You tell us, Eternal One, that we are precious in Your sight,  
that we are loved, that You formed and made us.  
For this gracious love we thank You.

Yet there are times, Lord Jesus,  
when we forget Your promises,  
when we ignore You standing at our side,  
and prefer to go our own way rather than trust in Yours.

Forgive us, good Lord, and give us time to turn back,  
time not only to know Your love but to spread it,  
time not just to experience Your grace but to share it,  
time not just to rest in Your assurance but to help others to be safe.

Remind us, Most Holy Spirit,  
that we are created for glory,  
even as we are mix of saint and sinner, wheat and chaff,  
give us the grace to accept our forgiveness,  
to forgive others, and to forgive ourselves. Amen.

## Prayer for Illumination

You speak to us, O God,  
in ancient words and contemporary interpretation,  
in the majesty of creation, and in the minutia of our lives,  
shine in our hearts and lives,  
that as we hear we may follow. Amen.

## Readings

*Isaiah 43:1-7 | St Luke 3:15-17, 21-22*

## All Age Activity

You will need a children's jigsaw – with enough pieces to make the exercise worthwhile but not so many you'll be there all day! Explain that with a jigsaw you must get the pieces so that you can see the final picture – sometimes we look at the picture on the box but even with that it's hard. Let folk put the jigsaw together and encourage and help as needed. When they've done it explain that in baptism Jesus put together all the pieces of his life – his ancestors, his family and friends, and his future. When we are baptised all the aspects of our lives come together as we offer ourselves to God. There's a big picture – seen fully only by God – which we try to build with the pieces of our lives like the pieces of a jigsaw.

## Sermon Notes

*Isaiah 43: 1-7*

In this passage the prophet addresses a bruised and battered people, dislocated and despondent, living in exile the Jews had little hope of return. The people are reminded, after harsh words in the previous chapter, that they are precious in God's sight – they may feel insignificant at the margins of a mighty empire but they are held in God's own hand. The prophet reminds them that they belong to God and, despite their sins, cannot be

separated from God. In our own day we might ponder who we are and whose we are. We might wonder what makes us worthy.

### *Psalm 29*

Calvin thought the Psalm was addressed to haughty humans rather than the heavenly beings the NRSV has. The metrical version sung in URC Sunday Service for 12<sup>th</sup> January renders the opening line as “All on Earth and All in Heaven” which covers most bases! Calvin thought the Psalm was a reminder to see beyond the forces and powers that control the world and to turn to God the world’s true sovereign. Calvin’s reading is a good counter point to the powers and principalities that exist today – where haughty (normally men) accumulate wealth and power and behind systems used to keep them in power. The rise of Christian nationalism drove Mr Trump back to the White House (along with a Democratic Party that allowed itself to be portrayed as elitist whilst Mr Trump was seen as ordinary!) Mr Trump and his followers need reminding that glorifying God is rather more than voting for a particular party. The powers of racism that swirl around us and infest politicians ever more eager to pander to the press barons also need reminding that God alone do we glorify. Those who follow God are always tempted to put other things before God – whether that was the temptation to worship idols and pagan Gods in the ancient near east or the temptation to compromise with the Nazi state in 1930s Germany. It might be the temptation to see populist politicians as divinely ordained or it might be the temptation to see Christianity as having nothing to do with secular concerns and only focused on the spiritual. Maybe the political thunderstorms and tempests of our own age are signs that God is at work just as the Psalmist saw God at work in nature’s unleashed power. The Psalm reminds us to speak truth to the mighty – the truth that only God is to be worshipped, only Jesus is Lord.

### *Luke 3:15-17, 21-22*

John’s baptism was about repentance, separating out the good from the evil, the wheat from the chaff. With John you’d know if you were good or evil - John made it very clear. So we have to wonder why Jesus submitted to baptism from his cousin – a baptism that was about, according to John, turning away from evil and towards God. In Luke the baptism narrative after the genealogy but before the Temptations. We skip over the genealogies as they are rather boring. Unlike Matthew, Luke doesn’t include the women in the Messianic line. He includes names of guy some of whom we’ve no idea of, others who were nasty characters. Abraham is there who pimped his wife and tried to murder his son. So is Judah is there who tried to get out of his responsibilities to a woman he made pregnant. David the voyeur murdering rapist is there. We can assume that Jesus’ ancestors were a motley crew; a mixture of good and bad and, like us, something in-between. Jesus was born into a world of personal and systemic sin. He’d know this with those ancestors, with the occupation of Rome, with heartless taxation and justice. His baptism shows he understood this; in submitting to baptism he identified with the world in all its fallenness and in all its glory. Later in Luke Jesus is driven to the wilderness to face temptation – something we come back to in Lent. In a world where sin is baked in,

where oppression is part of our systems and structures, Jesus rejects the temptation to just make the best of things. Jesus cannot escape the tragic structure of the world – he’s Son of Adam, Son of God, after all. But he ensures he bends his will to God’s. By accepting John’s baptism, Jesus rejects John’s dualism of good versus evil, wheat or chaff, saint or sinner, and, as his genealogy shows, life is complex. No wonder he was accused of being a glutton, a drunk, a friend of sinners and outcasts. Jesus was part of an interconnected web – ancestors and friends, systems and structures that he worked in and redeemed.

### *Weaving the Threads*

Contemporary people are very concerned with identity and purpose – who are we? What are we here for? How do we find meaning in life? These are questions that folk wrestle with seeking answers in social movements, politics and, sometimes, in faith. We may find meaning in identities based on how we love, where we were born or live, how we vote or how we live. And, in finding those identities we strive to find meaning. We’re tempted to think of all this as a modern phenomenon, but our readings show these concerns were ones which preoccupied the ancients too. Like the Jewish exiles we may feel estranged in our culture which, at best, ignores us and, at worst, sees us (with good reason) as dangerous. We might be tempted to find our identity, and safety, in what our money can buy. The need to be secure is as important as it ever was. Employers transfer pension risks to the workers rather than bear it themselves, rent costs more than mortgages - yet one needs to earn a lot of get a mortgage. A move away from a unionised workforce means it’s easier than ever to lose one’s job. Mr Putin’s invasion of Ukraine shows how precarious things are not in faraway places but in countries very near us. Yet, we’ll only find true security in God; the Psalmist reminds us to ascribe God glory (and by implication that means not ascribing it elsewhere!). Over the floods and thunders, the waves and flames, God is there providing our identity and security, our place under the sun. As Christians our prime identity is secured in our baptism. Jesus’ baptism served to identify with his mixed ancestry, his humanity in that time and place, and with God’s will. Ours serves to identify us as God’s and God’s alone. Despite our sins God loves us; our identity is assured in God’s promises. At baptism we were marked by and claimed for God; great promises were made – God keeps His!

## **Affirmation of Faith**

We believe in the one and only God, Eternal Trinity,  
from whom, through whom and for whom all created things exist.

**God alone we worship; in God we put our trust.**

We worship God, source and sustainer of creation,  
**whom Jesus called Father, whose sons and daughters we are.**

We worship God revealed in Jesus Christ,  
the eternal Word of God made flesh;  
who lived our human life,

died for sinners on the cross;  
who was raised from the dead,  
and proclaimed by the apostles, Son of God;  
**who lives eternally, as saviour and sovereign,  
coming in judgement and mercy, to bring us to eternal life.**

We worship God, ever present in the Holy Spirit;  
who brings this Gospel to fruition, assures us of forgiveness,  
**strengthens us to do God's will,  
and makes us sisters and brothers of Jesus, sons and daughters of God.**

We believe in the one, holy, catholic and apostolic Church,  
united in heaven and on earth: on earth, the Body of Christ,  
**empowered by the Spirit to glorify God and to serve humanity;  
in heaven, eternally one with the power, the wisdom  
and the love of God in Trinity.**

We believe that, in the fullness of time, God will renew and gather in one  
all things in heaven and on earth through Christ,  
and be perfectly honoured and adored.  
**We rejoice in God who has given us being,  
who shares our humanity to bring us to glory,  
our source of prayer and power of praise;  
to whom be glory, praise and adoration, now and evermore. Amen.**

## Intercessions

We bring our prayers to God, the Eternal Trinity.

Eternal One, we pray for those who feel insecure;  
for refugees fleeing war, oppression and poverty,  
for those waiting for the next bomb to drop and cling to life,  
for those whose loves and lives attract anger and hate,  
for those meeting in secret to worship this day for fear of the powers.  
May we, through our gifts, faith, and life **change the world.**

Lord Jesus, we pray for those baptised this day,  
those making promises for themselves – often at great risk –  
and those parents making promises on their child's behalf,  
remind them of Your faithfulness and love,  
prepare them for lives of discipleship that they, with us,  
through our gifts, faith, and life, we may **change the world.**

Most Holy Spirit, remind us to look beyond our own identities,  
our own searches for safety, our own riches and wealth,

to see that it is God alone that we worship,  
God alone in whom we must trust,  
that through our gifts, faith, and life, we may, **change the world.**

Eternal Trinity of Love,  
we hold before you now, in the silence of our hearts, all who are in need....

May we, through our gifts, faith, and life **change the world.**

As Jesus taught, so we pray...

## Offertory

Part of our identity as Christians involves giving. St Paul reminds us that God loves cheerful givers – though I'm sure grumpy ones are welcome too! Giving changes us, it reinforces our identity as being part of God's people, and it changes the world. We give with love of our time, talents and treasure; we give in many ways to many different people and causes. We may give in the plate in church or by standing order, we may give by remembering the Church in our wills. However we give, let's give thanks for the ways in which such giving brings change:

Loving God, thank you for the gifts you shower up on us,  
and for the ways in which you provide for us to give;  
help us to remember that giving changes us –  
helping us control our selfish desires.  
Help us to remember that giving reminds us that we are Yours.  
Help us to remember the difference that our giving makes  
to the lives of others. Bless these gifts and all that is given in this place,  
that we may continue as Your people and, as we are changed,  
change the world. Amen.

## Blessing

May the One who made the silent stars shine,  
the One who understood his past, present, and future,  
and the One who calls our hearts to follow,  
shine upon you, allow you to understand your contexts,  
and give you the grace to follow,  
and the blessing of Almighty God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit,  
be with you ever more. Amen.

## Hymn Suggestions

	RS	CH4	StF	MP
Summoned by the God Who Made Us			689	
Christ Is Our Light! The Bright and Morning Star		336		
When Jesus Came to Jordan			233	
The Silent Stars Shine Down On Us			231	
Like the murmur of the Dove's song		592	389	
Breathe on me breath of God	295	596	370	67
Come Down O Love Divine	294	489	372	89
How Firm A Foundation	589			243
To God Be the Glory	289	512	94	708
Do Not Be Afraid	591	191		115

RS – *Rejoice and Sing* | CH4 – *Church Hymnary 4* | StF – *Singing the Faith* | MP – *Mission Praise*

You might also want to have a go at the metrical version of Psalm 29 I chose for the online service. [All on Earth and All in Heaven](#) It is set to Ebenezer which is a good strong tune.