

BAPTISM OF CHRIST A – ST NICOLAS’S, ABINGDON

11 January 2026



Isaiah 42.1–9 / Acts 10.34–43 / Matthew 3.13–17

I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?

✠ In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit – *Amen*

THAT JOHN THE BAPTIST KEPT A PECULIAR DIET and dressed oddly, but St Matthew tells us that John could put his finger right on a vexing theological headache: *why baptise Jesus?* What might motivate Jesus to seek baptism from the hairy, hungry prophet of repentance?

The Letter to the Hebrews frames the issue thusly: ‘We do not have a high priest [that is, Jesus] who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who *in every respect has been tested*’ — and here the Greek uses a verb *πειράζω* that usually means ‘tested’, but which the church traditionally read as meaning ‘*tempted*’ — ‘one who in every respect has been tempted *as we are*, yet without sin’. But if Jesus was indeed ‘without sin’, why would he come to John to receive this ‘baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins’? As John asks, ‘*I need to be baptized by you; why do you come to me?*’

Further: St Paul associates baptism with death to *sin*, death to matters of strictly *mortal* interest. Hunger, lust, greed, self-satisfaction, all such impulses affect us in ways that *distract* us from God, that focus us on gratifying our *flesh*. Now, flesh is not a bad thing in itself — let *nobody* tell you that flesh is bad! Flesh is a good thing, as God showed in the act of creation: ‘God saw everything that he had made, and indeed, it was VERY good.’ But flesh *by itself* isn’t an unmixed blessing, because flesh wears out.

It grows weak, it decays, and eventually all flesh *perishes*. That's why they call it 'the way of all flesh'. So when St Paul diagnoses spiritual problems in his congregations, he reminds them that *in baptism* they have already died with regard to the flesh, and should now *live* by the *Spirit*. But then we face the problem that Jesus, the sinless Son of God, did *not* need to die to the flesh, because he truly and eternally *lives* in a fuller way than you or I can comprehend with the capacities that flesh affords us. 'No eye has seen, nor ear heard, nor the human heart conceived, what God has prepared for those who love him' — but these imperceptible, *magnificent* gifts are precisely what Jesus came among us to offer us, and we accept them by living as peaceable, merciful witnesses to the God of love. Jesus didn't *need* baptism to participate in those gifts; they were his to *give*, right from the start.

Finally, Paul teaches us that by baptism, we are *united with Christ*. But obviously Jesus didn't need to be united with Christ; he *was*, and *is*, the Christ. *We* need to be united with Christ so that we can share in his eternal, abundant life. We, whose lives depend on flesh, can't *escape* participating a world ruled by sin and suffering, we can't *earn* our release from mortality by trying harder, by outdoing other less *worthy* sinners; we all have perishable flesh, and our flesh will always perish no matter what Californian billionaire technologist says otherwise. And we *certainly* won't attain immortality by spending uncountable fortunes on transfusions, infusions, perfusions — that's all just *confusion*. Christ could not be bound by death because 'in him was life, and the life was the light of all people.' Epiphany and the Baptism of Christ go *together* to remind us that Christ the Light of the World is also, with the Holy Spirit, the Lord and Life-giver. We seek baptism to join *our* fragile lives to Christ's *imperishable* life, so that when our flesh finally fails us, as flesh fails all — even Jesus — we may share in his victory over death. But baptism did not *add* unity, or eternal life, or forgiveness to *Jesus* the way baptism imparts

those gifts to *us*.

So John recognises Jesus and says, 'I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?' As historians we might surmise that at some point, everybody *knew* that Jesus had been baptised by John, and that John's question reflects the confusion many early followers felt. Perhaps it even served to assure John's *own* followers that John *himself* knew that Jesus was greater.

But all that doesn't answer John's *question*, 'Why would the sinless Son of God receive baptism?' If we think along with Matthew, and Paul, and even John the Baptist himself, we may see several *complementary* ways of reckoning with the baptism of Christ.

First, although according to Hebrews, Jesus did not participate in sin, he undeniably participated in *flesh*; and flesh is weak, and among us flesh *prevails* over most of us day by day in at least fleeting envy or anger, in desire or sloth, and in the end flesh leads us inexorably to death. On this account, Jesus seeks baptism for the same reason he seeks out each of us: out of love for us in all our mortal foolishness and even our malice, for the Son of Man came to call not the righteous but sinners like us, to offer us, through baptism, gifts that we cannot purchase, cannot even *perceive*, any other way.

But I think most importantly, it is proper, it is *fitting*, it is as we might say *theologically symmetrical* for Jesus who came to share in our humanity, to share our human participation in baptism. Baptism doesn't remedy something that was wrong with Jesus, but in his joining us in our humanity, he shows us a way for *us* to seek the remedy *we* need for the sinfulness that is wrong in *us*. His baptism shows us the way for us to follow. Jesus needs baptism for his *solidarity* with us to be *complete*. In order to *perfect* the mutual union by which mortal flesh and immortal divinity share *fully* in our identities, it is proper that Jesus share the baptism humanity needs. When we unite ourselves to Jesus, we do not

have divinity *sellotaped* onto us, or fitted next to us as if we were matching jigsaw pieces; we have divinity *integrated into* us, and if we will but let it, if we will allow the Spirit to fill our hearts, we can *live* by that divinity as Jesus, as St Matthew, as St Paul tell us. So go we down to the river to pray, to receive baptism from John, with Jesus among us, as one of us, all to share in one baptism — for thus we shall fulfil all righteousness.

✠ In the Name of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit —
Amen