**8th January 2023**

Come, all who are happy:  
**let us learn from Jesus.**  
Come, all who are sad:  
**let us learn from Jesus.**  
Come, if you are not sure how you feel today:  
**let us learn from Jesus.**  
Come, one and all,  
to meet with Jesus.

[**A gathering prayer**](javascript:void(0))

Lord Jesus, thank you that you welcome us,  
no matter how we feel.  
Draw us to together; draw us to you.  
Help us to forget about ourselves for a while  
and to focus on you.  
Fill us deeply with a desire to worship you,  
our living Lord.  
**Amen.**

[**A prayer of approach**](javascript:void(0))

Father of all,  
who created the heavens and the earth,  
thank you that we are your beloved.  
Your Holy Spirit descended on Jesus like a dove.  
May your Spirit meet us where we are today.  
May your Spirit breathe new life into us today.  
May you hold us with your righteous right hand.  
In Jesus’ name.  
**Amen.**

[**A prayer of adoration**](javascript:void(0))

Almighty God,  
good Father to us all, creator and redeemer,  
we worship you today.  
Beloved Jesus,  
who came and lived among us, who showed us how to live,  
we worship you today.  
Holy Spirit, giver and sustainer of life,  
who guides us day by day in wisdom and truth,  
we worship you today.  
**Amen.**

[**A prayer of confession and an Assurance of forgiveness**](javascript:void(0))

**A prayer of confession**

Dear Lord Jesus,  
even though you did no wrong and did not need to be forgiven,  
you chose to be baptized; you chose to be like us.  
We are sorry when we make wrong choices.  
We are sorry when we don’t have the right attitude.  
We are sorry when we choose to go our own way,  
rather than following your perfect example.  
We are sorry; please forgive us.  
Help us to show humility and obedience as you did.  
Help us to become more like you.  
**Amen.**

**Assurance of forgiveness**

Beloved Jesus, who loves us so much,  
thank you that, by your blood,  
we are forgiven and restored to new life in you.  
**Amen.**



[**A prayer of praise and thanksgiving**](javascript:void(0))

Most merciful God,  
we thank you for your beloved Son Jesus,  
who moved into the neighbourhood and lived among us.  
Thank you that we too are your beloved.  
Thank you that you sent your Son to die and rise again,  
so that we might have life and true freedom in you.  
Thank you that we have been chosen by you,  
and that your love never ends, despite our failings and shortcomings.  
Thank you that you chose to come to earth and be flesh among us.  
We thank and praise you our heavenly king.  
**Amen.**



**Matthew 3.13-17**

Sermon

January is arguably the most miserable month of the year. For the optimists of course it offers the chance for a new start; new opportunities, new fitness regimes; new activities. But for many people it is a time of self-loathing when you reflect on all the things you are not happy about. I need to lose weight. I need more money. My relationships aren’t good; where has the fun gone, where’s the romance. The party is over and Christmas is back in its box; the credit card bill is in the post and the weather is dark and depressing – just like our mood. And then everyone you meet compounds the misery by wishing you a ‘Happy new Year’.

Many people will have dragged themselves back to work this week with their travel disrupted by another round of rail strikes. Discussions about increasing the border force strikes continue and other unionised workers such as postal workers consider their next steps. Going on strike is a big step for workers to take - they lose money and aren’t able to help people the way they want to - but negotiations last year have not borne fruit. For those workers, and for us, the New Year is a time to think about what is important to us and what sacrifices we are willing to make in order to get there.

‘[Dry January’](https://www.independent.co.uk/life-style/dry-january-drinking-sober-b2255250.html) or ‘Veganuary’ has risen in popularity over recent years hitting a high in 2023 as people seek to start the New Year in a healthier way. Dry January continues a long-held trend of people taking steps to improve their health & lifestyle at the start of a new year. Our culture seems to like ‘silver bullet’ approaches to health where cutting one thing out or taking up a specific exercise regime will be the thing that changes our lives. The focus is on our willpower and our ability to identify what the ‘one thing’ will be that will turn our personal situation around.

After a 2022 with three different prime ministers, the nation is looking forward to greater stability in 2023 and intervention to support our healthcare system and economy. The Prime Minister set out his five priorities: to halve inflation, to grow the economy, to decrease the national debt, to reduce NHS waiting lists, and to stop illegal immigrants from entering the country, especially by small boats. He wants to be judged on how successful he has been in meeting these challenges. Time will tell.

One week into the new year and how many resolutions remain standing? Chances are our young people will have heard umpteen assemblies, tutor times and thoughts for the day about the fresh opportunity a new year gives us, together with the need to start again - to change and be a different person to the one we were last year. And undoubtedly, many will already be feeling they have failed as old habits have not given way to the new that they hoped for.

New year: new priorities, new starts, new you.

Our faith talks about new life, new starts, new priorities.

Baptism is a sign of starting over: death to our old ways and rebirth into the new. For Jesus this was clearly not about death to a sinful lifestyle - it was a marker in the ground, a moment in time when he stepped up to begin his ministry. From the outset, Jesus was declaring that he knew who he was and whose he was.

As we start this new year, there can be no greater message. Not simply to focus on trying to fix our own failures, but rather knowing that we are created, known, loved and called by God and that everything we are and do stems from that.

How we think of ourselves is very powerful for our sense of self-worth, our esteem and our mental wellbeing.

There is a debate and usually it is across generations, about how much affirmation you should give a child. Some say that if you give too much then you are in danger of making them into pampered self obsessive brats. Too little and they may have problems relating to others - giving and receiving love and growing in emotional maturity. Some argue that you can never give enough affirmation for we are all wounded and in need of being loved deep in our inner being.

I came across an article claiming that at school children are not prepared for the real world of work because they are always being affirmed no matter whether they come first or last in the school race, or whether their homework is shoddy or well researched and presented.

One commentator was arguing that more Saturday jobs is what teenagers need to prepare them for the real world and how opportunities have shrunk to provide them. Libby Purves[[1]](#endnote-1) writes that *in good modern education the emphasis for the first time in history is entirely on you. Your development, your ‘potential’, your scores, your character, it’s all about you! Even work experience in year 10 is for your benefit not the employers as the aspirational send their young to follow irritated solicitors around all day, while the more artful parents drive home the need for qualifications by suggesting a week’s drudgery somewhere cold and mucky.*

*But step into your first earning job and the emphasis changes. Mr Miggins at the newsagent really does not care a jot about your personal development, he just needs the magazine sections sorting at dawn. Sam’s café is not interested in what washing up will do for you, but in keeping the clean plates coming. Your older workmates may at first think you’re a clumsy waste of space. There may be banter. You better suck it up if you want that pay packet. You may feel indignation, but this is adulthood, this is business, this is real’*

We often identify ourselves with what we do and our work. When brought up to believe we can be anything we want to, to live the dream in some Disney sense – reality can be crushing when we don’t get the breaks and chances, we think we deserve.

Friends and family members may not always turn out to be who we thought they were which can also lead us to a period of identity crisis.

The story of the baptism of Jesus has Jesus affirming and being affirmed.

This story has paused many questions in Christian study. Why was an act of repentance, which was what John’s Baptism was all about, needed by someone who was believed to have no sin to confess? The key may lie in the words ‘for us’ in verse 15. John has asked why Jesus needs to be baptised and Jesus replies ‘“Let it be so now; it is proper for us to do this to fulfil all righteousness’ (verse 15)

In his baptism Jesus was acting as a servant, faithfully identifying himself with and representing the people God had called. The one who would end his life on a cross between two thieves was willing to begin his ministry in a river among sinners. Jesus himself didn’t need to be baptised but he belonged to a people who did. By submitting to John’s baptism in an act of great humility, Jesus took his place among a renewed Israel, in obedience to God’s plan. He would take up the vocation declared in Isaiah, living, proclaiming and fulfilling the liberating righteousness of God’s kingdom. God stands with us in the baptism of Jesus.

Of course, people have being doing what they think is the right thing to do for ages and being righteous has been a feature of human behaviour down the centuries.

People want to be seen to be doing the right thing and getting affirmed by wider society. In our day, for example, raising funds for charity is seen as doing the right thing and our newspapers are full of people wanting to be seen doing the ‘right thing’.

But there are other virtue signallers as they are described in modern society – things you associate with because they give you worth, as much as the cause you associate with is worthy.

The season for making new year resolutions is full of claims about and desires for ‘righteousness’. Living in a right way – whoever defines what a right way is.

Going to church arguably is not seen as doing the right thing in society as much as it was because of the popular view that going to church is irrational, bigoted and discriminatory - and many people dismiss us with such lazy accusations.

Our secular society has problems in believing in God and appeasing a god. To win God’s approval - to believe that God says ‘with you I am well pleased’ - doesn’t seem to be high on most of our society’s priorities for 2023.

A report suggested that atheists are more likely to have a cat than church goers. They require daily offerings, always seem to be judging you and rarely reciprocate acts of devotion. Samuel Perry from the University of Oklahoma says, ‘We own pets because we love their company and the special interaction they provide for us. In some ways pets are actually substitutes for human interaction – but people who are heavily connected to a church already have plenty of social interaction and have the ongoing presence of God with them.’

There you go – we don’t need cats – we’ve got God to love us.

It appears that, by consenting to be washed clean by the Baptist, Jesus is simply agreeing to a conventional cleansing ritual, similar to that followed by all pious Jews. Here, it reveals God’s greater righteousness – that the man who is baptized is the Son in whom God is pleased (Matthew 3.17). He is righteousness personified. He is the one who will cleanse lepers and heal the sick at a time when convention said the righteous people will avoid them for fear of pollution. Far from being tainted by touching the ‘unclean’, Jesus will cleanse them.

Jesus was baptised into the movement that desperately sought to do the right thing of what God requires – but you need to be ever so careful when you are so sure you know what God requires of you.

Roy Lloyd, a Lutheran minister, once interviewed Mother Teresa. He said that one of his questions, and one of her answers, stands out in his mind as "a bright sun burning in my mind." He asked her, "What's the biggest problem in the world today?" And she answered, without hesitation, "The biggest problem in the world today is that we draw the circle of our family too small. We need to draw it larger every day."

With all that is evil and wrong in this world today it would be easy to answer that question with a hundred different events. That's what makes Mother Teresa's response so jilting. She is saying that the problem is not so much with the world, as it is with us. We need to see more people as our neighbour than we are currently doing.

I see Jesus doing this in his baptism. In his baptism he included us in his righteousness. He identified with humanity, with our need to be cleansed, and our need to be made pure. If you have been baptized you have been drawn, by Jesus' baptism, into the circle of God's family.

The story is told of a pastor's words to a baby shortly after she had baptized him. No doubt, the minister was speaking as much to the congregation as to the infant. "Little brother, by this act of baptism, we welcome you to a journey that will take your whole life. This isn't the end. It's the beginning of God's experiment with your life. What God will make of you; we know not. Where God will take you, surprise you, we cannot say. This we do know and this we say -- God is with you."

And God will be with us as we live out our baptism.

Jesus affirmed us by entering into our baptism. But in his baptism, he too was affirmed by his heavenly father with those wonderfully affirming words: ‘This is my beloved Son, in whom I take delight’.

We all need to be affirmed. We all need to be loved. The deepest and most secure experience of being loved is to know you are valued and loved by God. That is the work of the Holy Spirit in our lives. Like a dove descending to alight on us – like a hand resting on our shoulder – God delights in us.

The Alpha Course is as good a place as any to come and explore the Christian claims about meaning and faith. It is a open friendly and curious environment to ask those big questions and explore possible answers.

The trouble is we think, like most of our experience in life, we need to win approval. We need to earn the affirmation by doing something worthy of praise, something good.

Martin Copenhaver (Whispered in Your Ear) writes how he was praised for learning to walk as a baby. But then realised he had to do more to get the same praise. After a time, I could walk with more assurance but, for some reason, I didn't receive so much praise. In fact, I can't remember the last time that anyone praised me for walking across a room. So, I had to do other things. Simply walking just wasn't good enough anymore. I had to strive to make a splash in other ways, just to get back to that feeling, that feeling of being noticed, of being picked up with a shout of delight, of being valued.  
  
For the most part, we don't have much experience with unconditional love, so we try to create conditions in which we will feel worthy of love. We do not entirely trust love without reasons, so we strive to create reasons for the love received.  
  
And in all that striving, it's easy to lose sight of the fact that my parents did not praise me because of my accomplishments. Rather, they praised my accomplishments because they loved me, and would have loved me if there were no accomplishments to praise.

He concludes:   
If parents sometimes have something like unconditional love, a love without reasons, for their children, how much more so does God love God's children? All of our striving to try to win something that is ours already. God values you, not because you have distinguished yourself in some way, but because you are God's beloved.  
  
May you strive for the righteousness of God but know deep down you are loved unconditionally by God.

[**Prayers of intercession**](javascript:void(0))

Almighty God, surrounded as we are by the troubles of the world, where paths are not straight and where justice does not prevail, where so much pain and anguish is in evidence, we bring our prayers for those in need, knowing you hear our prayers and the deep yearnings of our hearts.

Hear us, Lord;  
**hear our words and the yearnings of our hearts.**

We pray for those we know whose needs seem so overwhelming, those whose pain finds no relief, those who feel submerged by their anguish and their distress. May we offer words of comfort where we can, a listening ear to those who will talk, a gentle touch for those who need companionship, a smile that restores their belief in humanity.

Hear us, Lord;  
**hear our words and the yearnings of our hearts.**

We pray for those who are alone and feel all at sea in this troubled world. Those who cannot see the way ahead, cannot see God’s hand at work among them, around them and within them. For those for whom Christmas was no more than a time for Santa and fripperies, those for whom Baptism is a meaningless unknown ceremony, those who have not felt the touch of God’s Holy Spirit, or felt the touch of Jesus or seen the hand of God. For those for whom the church has no meaning and no purpose, no relevance and no place.

Hear us, Lord;  
**hear our words and the yearnings of our hearts.**

For those experiencing flooding in our country, those snowed in in America and Canada, those countries with searing heat and no rain and no harvests. Those countries already suffering dreadfully from climate change and all its ramifications.

Hear us, Lord;  
**hear our words and the yearnings of our hearts.**

For those suffering injustice beyond our imagining and understanding. Those exploited or abused because of gender or colour, race or creed, social standing or disability. Those who feel marginalised, ignored, cast aside.

Hear us, Lord;  
**hear our words and the yearnings of our hearts.**

We pray for whole nations that are being torn apart by war and violence, those who keep making headline news and those who slip from memory but not from the aggressor’s hand.

Hear us, Lord;  
**hear our words and the yearnings of our hearts.**

We give thanks for those who have changed the world for the better, those whose lives have meant so much to us and others. For those we know and love who have died and for those who we know of who have changed the lives of us and many more besides. We give thanks this weekend for the life of Pope Benedict whose faith and writings have influenced so many. We give thanks for the life of footballer Pele who had such a positive influence on so many in Brazil and further afield.

Hear us, Lord;  
**hear our words and the yearnings of our hearts.**

We pray for all aspects, providers and users of the NHS. For politicians who decide on planning and the way forward, for the treasury who decide on how much the nations can afford, for nurses, doctors, cleaners, admins who all bear the brunt of shortages and live with chaos daily while themselves feeling the pressures of our economic crisis. For patients and relatives who need care, attention, love and support.

Hear us, Lord;  
**hear our words and the yearnings of our hearts.**

We pray for ourselves, our family members, our neighbours and communities, that together we may live lives that are good, true and honest. That we may support and love each other as Jesus loves us. That we each may see the needs around us and respond in Jesus’ name.

Hear us, Lord;  
**hear our words and the yearnings of our hearts.**

Almighty God, this day, these are our prayers. **Amen.**



[**A prayer for all ages together**](javascript:void(0))

O Lord, in our work and in our play,  
**help us to do it your way.**  
In our service and in our worship,  
**help us to do it your way.**  
In our rest and in our fun,  
**help us to do it your way.**  
In all that we do,  
**help us to do it your way.**  
**Amen.**



[**A sending out prayer**](javascript:void(0))

As Jesus came to the river  
**to do what God wanted,**  
the Spirit came upon him  
**to show that God loved him.**  
Send us out from here  
**as your beloved children,**  
filled with the right attitude  
**to share your love with all the world.**  
**Amen.**

1. Libby Purves, The Times, Monday 6th Jan 2020 [↑](#endnote-ref-1)