**Baptism of the lord. LUKE 3. 15-22 Ascension 13.1.2019**

We have just celebrated the season of elevated commercial extravagance. We may have focussed fully on festivity and frivolity in an excess of indulgence.

In nightmare shopping, wide of eye and loose of pocket, we grasped for that elusive face-saving present which has already gone to the op-shop. We fell for the merchant’s spiel: “It’s the chance of a life-time,” as he put up decorations with one hand and put up the prices with the other.

Luke tells us the people of his day were filled with Christmas-type expectation. They had hoped that the coming of the long-awaited Messiah would bring them a Chrissie present of a whopper martial victory in which the detested Roman oppressors would be kicked into the sea forever.

Into this scene stepped John Baptist, with a weird wardrobe and a weirder diet. This ascetic was Israel’s awakener, God’s megaphone, come to give a head’s up warning, to make straight the crooked path for the imminent coming of the expected Messiah into hearts, that like ours at Christmas, were suffocated with a clutter of worldly concerns.

This magnetic character preached so compellingly, so convincingly, demanding inner cleansing, that he turned stone-cold hearts to warm, loving kindness, and with true repentance, hearers flocked to confess their sins and be baptized.

John told them of the Messiah: the One who would baptize with the Holy Spirit, and use a winnowing fork to clear away the chaff of egotism, self-interest, self-indulgence, and self-concern, so that the pure wheat may be gathered into his granary.

The Holy Spirit gift would come like flaming tongues to burn into folk a personal spiritual transformation to turn life and behaviour around. The former monk John set up his preaching patch at the spot, assumed to be where Israel on Exodus had once crossed over the River Jordan to first enter into the Promised Land. Every year, at Passover, the Chosen remembered how they waded through Jordan water to safety in the land of milk and honey.

John decided the present descendants of the first Exodus incomers needed a second wading Exodus, and turned the crossing into a re-immersion drama, with his hearers as the cast. One-by-one, he plunged them under Jordan water, shouting “He who is coming will baptize you with the indwelling presence of the Holy Spirit of God. You need to sharpen up! Seek the Lord’s forgiveness. Get your life right before the Day of his Coming!”

John’s fearless denunciation of sin focussed on the behaviour of the badly flawed king Herod, who, as the Lord’s anointed, should have been first to uphold the Jewish laws of decency and morality.

Yet, this sham monarch had married his brother’s Jezebel wife-Herodias. Hyena Herodias was more a cane toad; they eat anything that bugs them. When John pointed the finger, Herodias did not rest until she had the Baptist’s head on a platter.

In Luke’s account today, John was in prison awaiting the chopper, when Jesus fronted for Baptism. One of John’s disciples may have taken the ceremony.

In other Gospel accounts, sinless Jesus convinced a demurring John that baptism was what God required of him to cement a sense of oneness between Jesus and ourselves, to identify fully with us without reserve of any kind.

Jesus was like the former King and Queen, who chose to remain at Buck House during the Battle of Britain and not evacuate. In the “Hits of the Blitz” the palace was bombed.

Jesus’ baptism was a rehearsal for his “drowning” death and burial on Good Friday. Full immersion in the Jordan was an image of his total surrender to death. He was the grain of wheat, falling into the soil to die, to spring up to yield a rich harvest at his resurrection to victorious new life.

At our baptism, we join him in death to self. As he was raised to new life, our baptism is a rebirth to new life.

At his baptism, the prayer of Jesus tore open heaven to let descend the Holy Spirit as a dove. The dove signified God’s confirmation that Jesus had taken the right step, and was now empowered for ministry. No longer was he the Nazarene son of Mary walking the dusty roads of Israel, but heard “You are my Son, the Beloved offspring of God. You bring me great joy, on you my favour rests.”

Prayer opens heaven for us, too. At baptismal prayer, the Spirit descended to our depth to anoint us for mission, and we were called to greater and greater contests of generosity in our lives. But, what of our young, the future of our parish community?

Years ago, at their baptism, after the baby’s outraged protest at the violation with sprinkled water, the words sounded at John Baptist’s dedication were said in effect over them: “What will this child become? For, indeed, the hand of the Lord was with him?” [Luke 1.16].

In this past twelve months, our parish has shed twelve souls, two to heaven, four to Africa, four to coming and going, and two to new nursing homes.

The future of our Church lies with our young ones. What more can we do to bring our young home to mother Church, for indeed, as one-by-one we fade, the hand of the lord will be with them still?