

A NEW START

This is the sermon I gave at St Mark's, Purley, on 2 January 2000 at the baptism of a baby boy called Jordan. A relative had recently been to the Holy Land and brought back with them a bottle of water from the River Jordan which I used at the baptism. The theme of a new start, appropriate at the beginning of a new millennium, speaks to us today as we wonder what the post-Covid New Normal will be like.

This bottle contains water from the river Jordan in Israel. The Jordan is Israel's main river; it runs for 240 miles from Mount Hermon in the north to the Dead Sea in the south, passing from through the Sea of Galilee on its way. It is a major source of water for the region, and has an important place in the religion and history of Israel. Joshua crossed the Jordan while its waters were held back when he led Israel into the promised land; Elijah the prophet crossed it in the same way before being taken up into heaven; Naaman the Syrian washed in it to be cured of his leprosy; John the Baptist called the people to repentance by its banks, and they and Jesus were baptized in it. Their sins were washed away by the river to be lost in the Dead Sea for ever.

Water is about life, and the Jordan is closely connected with the life of Israel, and especially with the renewal of its life. Becoming a nation, going to be with God, being healed of a disfiguring disease, acknowledging sinfulness and turning to God are all new beginnings, and it is appropriate that we start the year AD 2000 not only with a baptism, but with the baptism of a boy called Jordan. We can let this child, so happily named, remind us of what this new year is really all about.

In the press and the media we hear about the Millennium, and while the year 2000 does mark the beginning of the third millennium, its religious significance is that it is a Year of Jubilee. One of the basic rules of Israelite society was that every seven years there was to be a remission of debts, just as every seven years the land should have a rest. And after seven periods of seven years, that is after forty-nine years, a year of jubilee was to be proclaimed. The fiftieth year was to hallowed and liberation was to be proclaimed for all who lived in the land. Not only were debts to be remitted, but everyone was to return to his property and to his family. No work was to be done; it was to be a year of celebration; a renewal of the life of the nation; a new start. At the end of a thousand years, in the same way, we celebrate a Great Jubilee. The Millennium resolution captures well the spirit of the celebration:

Let there be
respect for the earth
peace for its people
love in our lives
delight in the good
forgiveness for past wrongs
and from now on a new start.

A jubilee year is an opportunity for repentance, for healing relationships, a change of heart, and the opening up of ourselves to the love of Christ. It is a time for taking everyone's interests seriously, especially the poor, and for the cancelling of debts. This is what this Jubilee Year is about, and baptism symbolises all these things.

Those who come to be baptized turn to Christ. To turn to someone is to acknowledge our need for their help and strength. We all find it hard to lead the life we believe to be right and true; we all have done things of which we are ashamed; in one way or another we all need a new start.

Jordan, innocent and perfect, is born into a world sorely in need of a change of heart; he inherits the foolishness of our ways; he inherits our need for a new start. Turning to Christ we look to him for his help and strength to live the life we want to lead, and to make the world a better place for our children. We acknowledge our indebtedness to God and ask for his healing and forgiveness.

The washing with water is about making us clean, cancelling our debts. Our sins are carried away by the Jordan, as it were, to be lost in the Dead Sea for ever. God comes close to us, pours upon us his love, and sets us free to live for him. In baptism He gives us a new beginning.

Alas, as St John put it in the Gospel reading, not every one acknowledges their need of God. When Jesus came to his own people they would not accept him. But to all who did accept him, to those who put their trust in him, he gave the right to become children of God (*John 1.10-12*).

Today God takes Jordan for his own child, promising him his strength and help throughout his life. God promises the same to everyone. Before the baptism, I invite you all to bring before God your own need for a new start, and as the parents and God-parents make their promises open your heart to him, and as Jordan is baptized, imagine God pouring over you his love, and your sins being washed away to be lost in the Dead Sea for ever. Let this Jubilee Year be your new start with God.

To him be the glory, now and for ever. Amen.