

Baptism of Christ 2026

Isaiah 42:1-9; Matt.3:13-end.

This is my Son, the Beloved, in whom I am well pleased. Behold my servant: my chosen in whom my soul delights.

It's not a bad way of beginning to think about the Trinity – a doctrine I know that often seems very difficult. The Son is the one in whom the Father delights. Jesus makes God's heart sing with joy. In the same way that maybe, on their good days, a human child might delight human parents, makes you well up with joy and pride: here is someone you've poured your heart and soul into, here's one who is everything you wanted them to be.

That is just the faintest analogy for who Jesus is in relationship to his Father. He's the one who in whom the Father bursts with joy, who gives joy to the Father just through being who he is. He is, says the Letter to the Hebrews, the reflection of God's glory and the exact imprint of God's very being. And that idea of reflection is another helpful one – it's a rather poor and crude analogy as they all are when it comes to talking about God, but try imagining the Father and the Son as two perfect mirrors, facing each other, with brilliant light bouncing between them – well, that light is what we call the Holy Spirit: the love, the joy, the de-light which unites the Father and the Son, which is their shared life.

What does it look like when that divine life wants to include us in it? Because that's what's the Gospel is all about – that this life of light and joy, the divine delight, wants us inside it. That's what we mean when we talk about being saved or going to Heaven, that we're going to be caught up in what the Father and the Son share, made part of that dance of light between the mirrors. God became human, the ancient church used to say, so that we might become divine. God became human so that we might become divine. Not, so that we might become good people, or have a little inner peace, or even have our sins forgiven: so much more than all that. God became human, so that we might become divine.

So again, what does it look like when the divine life becomes human? Well, like Jesus, waiting in line, part of the crowd, standing by the Jordan river, waiting to go in so John can shove him under the water, down into the murk and the mud. Side by side with all those waiting for baptism, with all who had heard John's message and have come to repent their sins and start again. The eternal Son made flesh, the joy of heaven to earth come down, looks like just another sinner, waiting in line.

Which is why John tries to stop him. I need to be baptised by you, and do you come to me? This isn't right says John, this isn't how it is meant to be. You don't belong in this line, you don't belong with these people: you're the Son! You're the Saviour! You don't need baptism: you're the one this has all been about. What are you doing? And Jesus says, John, just let it be. You don't quite get it yet, but this is how it has to be. Thus it is fitting for us to fulfil all righteousness – in other words, this is the plan.

John doesn't quite get it yet, but this is how it has to be. What doesn't John quite get? Well, the way in which God is going to act. John had a fairly straightforward and easy to understand version of how God sorts out the world: basically, He will turn up, and He'll blast it – fire and fury and overwhelming judgement, get ready sinners, and flee from the wrath to come. That's John.

That's absolutely not Jesus. Isaiah 42:1-3, 'here is my Servant whom I uphold, my chosen in whom my soul delights. He will not cry or lift up his voice, a bruised reed he will not break, a dimly burning wick he will not quench'. A bruised reed he will not break, a dimly burning wick he will not quench. That's us, by the way, that he's talking about: all of us who have failed in some way, who are damaged, whose little bits of faith and goodness are almost gone, who are so far from being what we were meant to be. Tempted, perhaps, to think that we're only good for being thrown away, or snuffed out. Bruised reeds and dimly burning wicks the lot of us.

And what does God do? Does he stand over against us in fire and fury, burning up all that is not perfect, like John thought he would? No. He gets baptised. He stands with us, stands in line beside the river Jordan, and goes down into the mud and the murk, even though he doesn't belong there. He chooses to go where he doesn't belong, into all that river stands for, into all the failure and chaos and death, because He wants to be with us. He wants to be with us, to find us, to nurse us, to make us better, to bring us home. That how God works. It's an awesome gentleness. No fire and fury, just the gentleness of Jesus beside us, around us, within us. That's what will make us live again.

When Jesus gets baptised, what we're seeing is the awesome gentleness of God. His descent into what it's like to be us, His taking it on so He can make it well. And then, when we get baptised ourselves, what we're doing is getting immersed, getting soaked, in that awesome gentleness. We're putting ourselves in the love of God, sinking into it, letting it fill us up, letting it touch every dark corner of our lives. Letting ourselves be nursed, gently, back to life.

And this shapes the kind of people we become. If you are baptised, if you are soaked in the awesome gentleness of God, if you know what it is to be a dimly burning wick and not be snuffed out, to be a bruised reed and not be tossed away. If you know what it is, instead, to be nursed by God - then this is what you will do. You'll become, maybe slowly, maybe patchily, definitely inadequately, but you will really become people of gentleness. People who deal mercifully with one another - who do not hate, who do not judge, who not bite and snap and devour. People who are good with failure. People of peace. People shaped people, people who pass on, the awesome gentleness of God; who are to each other what God has been to us. That's what it is to be baptised. Not a bad calling to follow in 2026.