

BAPTISM OF JOY

(John 1.29-34)

Well, we haven't had much of a summer – and now it's going to get colder. It won't be long before the River Tees is frozen over. Just thought I'd spread a bit of cheer in this service about joy.

Imagine being baptized in the Tees! My youngest son Ben went swimming in it a few months ago and had a shivery stomach bug for a couple of weeks afterwards...

Actually, in the days of Communist Russia, it was illegal to be a Christian. If they found out you were getting baptized you could be sent to a Siberian labour camp or shot. So everyone who was baptized in winter time had to do it in frozen rivers. It was the only time of day they could be sure of dodging the secret police. They'd break the ice with a hammer, and totally immerse their new converts from head to toe before pulling them out – blue but new!

But the amazing thing was this: even though Christians faced prison, beatings, losing their jobs, ice cold baptisms, and risked death, the Church didn't just survive - it thrived.

Why is Ruby being baptized here today? Because she wants to. Ruby wants to follow Jesus. Ruby absolutely loves church which is just the meeting place of people who want to follow Jesus. And we absolutely love Ruby – as Jesus does.

Baptism basically means dunking, plunging, dipping, submersing or soaking. Why do we get baptized?

Firstly, because Jesus said to. Everything Jesus tells us to do, we do. That's what being a Christian means. "Go out into the world," he said, "and make disciples, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have told you." So if we want to be Christians, the first step is get baptized.

The man who started this baptism thing was a man called John the Baptist and he appears in our second reading. The one thing you notice in this reading is that he's always talking about Jesus. He says 126 words and every one of them is about Jesus.

It says "John saw Jesus coming towards him." What did he see? Well, Jesus had been a manual labourer for about 15 years. He was used to carrying beams of wood around. He could saw a tree trunk in half. He was used to physical work. He would have been strong and muscular, not weak and wimpy.

But there was something John noticed about Jesus that was different to everyone else he baptized. He must have baptized thousands. Great crowds came to see him. Every one else came to John and said "I need God, I'm a mess."

Many of us grow up hearing things like, "You could do better." "You are not good enough." "You'll never succeed." "You are wasting my time." "You never try hard enough." "Do better, try harder, hurry up, get on with it..." Have you heard those voices?

It leads to a life where people think "What can I do to be acceptable or accepted?"

John met people every hour like that. He met self harmers, petty thieves and drug addicts and alcoholics and messed up men and loose women and they all wanted to know: "Can God take all my mess away? Can he clean me up inside? Can he sort me out?"

But when John saw *Jesus* for the first time he saw someone who wasn't loaded with guilt, but one who could take guilt away. "Look, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!"

Sin just means anything we mess up on that spoils our friendship with God and makes him seem far away.

The Jesus who sweated in a workshop making wooden furniture is the same Jesus who spoke with authority, had compassion on the crowds, drove out evil spirits, healed the sick and touched lepers. And that's the same Jesus who still does all these things today.

Let me tell you the story of Stephen Lungu. He is the oldest son of a teenage mother from a township in Zimbabwe. She was trapped in a difficult marriage to a man more than twenty years older. She dealt with her struggles by drinking heavily.

One day, when Stephen was three years old, his mother took him, his brother and baby sister into town. She said "I need to go to the toilet" and she left Stephen holding his sister in the busy town square, while his little brother played on the ground. Two hours later she had not returned. Their mother had run away, leaving the three children in the care of an aunt. By the age of eleven, Stephen had run away from home – to live on the streets.

Growing up, Stephen developed a strong anger against God. As a teenager he got into one of the violent street gangs, called the Black Shadows, which carried out theft and destruction on the towns of Zimbabwe.

When a travelling preacher came to town to speak to thousands about Jesus in a large tent, Stephen went to firebomb the event. He carried a bag full of bombs. He wanted to attack the event because he wanted to attack God.

As Stephen waited for the moment for his attack, Shadrach Maloka, a South African preacher, took to the stage and announced that the Holy Spirit had warned him that many in the audience may die soon without Christ. The Black Shadows thought someone had figured out their plan and they ran out. Stephen was captivated by what he said.

The speaker's words convinced him about his messed up life and Stephen had an encounter with Jesus. He experienced God's presence. He received God's grace and peace.

He staggered forward to the stage, grabbed hold of the speaker's feet and began to sob. That evening, he became a follower of Jesus Christ.

The next morning he turned himself in at the local police station and confessed his crimes. The desk sergeant listened to his story, looked at the long list of crimes, and released him without charge.

Boarding a bus with the morning commuters, Stephen felt so happy that, like John the Baptist, he started telling others on the bus the good news about Jesus. And he's been doing that ever since.

Stephen now speaks about Jesus at events all over Africa. At an event a few years ago, a woman came forward wanting to change the direction of her life and follow Jesus. It turned out it was his own mother who had abandoned him all those years ago.

Jesus has changed Stephen's life. He has changed his mother's life. He has changed Ruby's life. He has changed my life. Has he changed your life yet?