

The Cross is the supreme symbol of Christianity. It is the most recognisable of symbols; it can be found the world over witnessing to the supreme sacrifice of Calvary. Whether it is on the top of a church or on the end of a chain, on a wall or on an altar, it is simple, it is powerful, it is certain.

The Cross, however strong a sign it is, is a long way from exhausting the symbolic language of Christianity. We share a religion that is rich with symbols. There is the fish, or if you're trying to be posh and sound interesting, the ichthus, which can be seen gracing the back of many a Christian car. There is the Chi Rho, IHS, the Madonna and Child, the Lamb and flag, the sandal, the gingham shirt and halitosis- on and on the list goes.

There is one simple, geometric symbol which is never considered to be Christian, and yet, I would like to suggest, symbolises something deep at the heart of our experience of faith, expresses something of the quintessence of the Christian experience. This symbol is the question mark.

You see, the Christian faith is a faith characterised by questions and unresolvable tensions. It has a toddler's penchant for pushing the square peg through the round hole, an older child's love of responding to every answer with another question, a faith that delights in saying that black is white and white is black, and revels in what academics and philosophers call dialectic which is basically the intellectual equivalent of trying to see behind your own head.

Now this may make us sound like a pretty confused lot. Well yes. And no. But this is how it should be, this is how it can only be. After all, when we start to talk about God, we can hardly expect to be able to use the same mental rules and categories as say, pigeon fancying, sailing or cookery. God is something completely different. As the saintly bishop of Constantinople John Chrysostom famously said, a comprehended God is no God. We can add that a faith that does not provoke a cascade of questions is no faith.

So this morning I wish to consider two questions. Before I start I will readily admit that these are largely unanswerable questions. But that's ok; we're Christians talking about the Christian faith, so let's cut ourselves some slack, ask the questions and see what we can come up with.

So first question, and one that has always taxed me. Why John the Baptist? That John the Baptist bloke: what's he all about then? Now John appears in all four gospels so

he's obviously got something important to do. Jesus says that no-one born of a woman has arisen greater than John. But it's not always readily obvious to us quite why that is. John the Baptist is a bit of a puzzle.

During Advent the church concentrated on the rôle of John as herald, as the voice crying in the wilderness. *There's* an important job, but if that's all there is, then John becomes rather like the man with a red flag who was required to walk in front of early motor cars to warn people of their approach, or the person shouting unclean and furiously ringing a bell whenever Boris Johnson enters the room. Surely, the 'greatest of those born of women' must be more than that.

Perhaps then John is important as a foil or counterpoint to Jesus. This is most obvious in Luke's gospel where the annunciation, conception and birth of Jesus and John are run together side by side in the story. There for comparison, John shows us how the wonders of the old covenant pale into insignificance next to the new- Elizabeth was old when she conceived; Mary was a virgin. Top that. However great the tale of JtB may be, it's nothing next to his cousin's. John's purpose to reflect back to us the glory of Jesus. Yet this, true though it may be, is to make John little more than a mirror: dark, lifeless, of itself pointless until light shines on it.

It is today, I think, at this feast of the Baptism of Jesus that we finally get what John the Baptist is all about. After this point in the gospels, apart from a brief reprise to lose his head, JTB fades from the story. Yes, John is a herald voice crying in the wilderness, yes John reflects the glory of Christ. But the principal 'Why' of JTB is to baptise Jesus. John was sent to baptise in order to baptise Jesus. All the other people he baptised went back to the depths of obscurity. But Jesus...

So there you go. An answer of sorts to the first question. Of course, as is so often the case, having answered one question we immediately get landed with another, bigger one. Why John the Baptist? To baptise Jesus. Ah then, but why baptise Jesus?

Here's the rub. John, as the Gospel says, was baptising for repentance of sins. Jesus came to be baptised by John. But then Christians believe that Jesus was without sin. If he wasn't just 'going through the motions' of baptism for the repentance of sins, why then, should Jesus be baptised?

There's no easy answer here and the theological arguments get a bit complicated here but there are two main points I'd like to lay at your feet today.

The first is this: what we celebrate today is an extension of what we celebrated just over two weeks ago on Christmas day. The baptism of Jesus represents the second part of the incarnation- God becoming human- and completes it. Jesus came to be baptised by John to receive the Holy Spirit: a spiritual birth. Just as Mary was filled with the Holy Spirit at Jesus' conception, so here Jesus is filled with the spirit at his baptism. At Christmas Jesus' divine nature received human nature- the divine became human; here, at Christ's baptism, the human nature receives the divine. It happened here in the Jordan rather than then in Bethlehem because Jesus was baptised when he had grown to the fulness of maturity of his humanity. Jesus baptism is the point at which the fulness of God-man is realised.

Just like our own baptisms, Jesus' baptism, by the descent of the Holy Spirit constitutes his spiritual birth. Just like our own baptisms, Jesus' baptism is the point at which his public ministry starts.

The second point is that by his own baptism, Jesus *makes holy* the waters of baptism, he transforms and sanctifies, the ritual washing of Jewish custom that was John's baptism. With the Holy Spirit now on board, baptism becomes a whole different ball-game; the baptism of John a pale shadow in comparison, a faint pre-echo of what is to come. When we are baptised into the Body of Christ, we share in his baptism, baptism of water and of the Holy Spirit.

So, there are two questions, and some partial attempts to start to answer them.

By this point, if you've managed to stay awake, you might be getting a touch restless, asking yourself what sort of faith is this that is so full of questions and partial answers? Maybe you've spent some time watching the God channel or sat in some of our neighbouring churches. Isn't faith, after all, supposed to be about rock-solid certainties? Isn't it supposed to be the absolute, Gospel truth?

Well yes, but Christianity is a faith of absolute truths and complete certainties *and* it is a faith riddled with paradox and shot through with question-marks.

You see, Christian truth does not operate on the level of facts, Christian truth it is not a list of facts- it is far more important than that. The Bible is not a compendium of facts, it's not a sort of Holy Wisden's Cricketer's almanac (well it might be, I've never looked inside a Wisden's but I'm assuming it does what it says on the tin and the Bible's not like that): much less are the scriptures a highway code for the Holy life. Facts are lifeless; Christian truth is dynamic; it can't be nailed down in a conveni-

ent unquestioning series of facts. Why? Because The Truth, with a capital 't'; *Christian* truth is a *person*, the person whose baptism the Church celebrates today: Jesus Christ, son of God, son of Mary, Word of God incarnate. Amid all the quite proper questions, ambiguities, discussions, doubt, *this* is the truth we proclaim: Jesus: the way, the truth, and the life.