

Facing the dragon

Sermon for the Feast of the Baptism of Christ, January 12th 2025, 8.30am Eucharist

Readings [Isaiah 43.1–7](#); [Luke 3.15–17, 21–22](#)

[The Hobbit: An Unexpected Journey](#) was my theme when I preached two weeks ago. It's such a long film, however (2 hours 49 minutes), that there's at least another sermon in it; and this is it.

Martin Freeman plays the reluctant hero Bilbo Baggins, and he finds reason after reason not to accept Gandalf the wizard's offer of 'an adventure':

'I can't just go running off into the blue! I am a Baggins, of Bag End!' or simply,

'Me? No, no, no, no!'

Before *The Hobbit* was a film it was a book. The author, J.R.R. Tolkien, was a Christian (he was a Roman Catholic and a pal of C.S. Lewis, of Narnia fame) and I think he may have based the character of Bilbo on Moses in the book of Exodus.

Moses wriggles from [excuse to excuse](#) when God tells him to lead the Israelites on their own adventure out of slavery in Egypt. This is the God we worship, who does unlikely things through unlikely people.

Today we celebrate the Baptism of Christ, and an unlikelihood of another kind. John the Baptist offers a new start with God. To those whose lives have become clogged and parched, and to a whole nation thirsty for change, John offers cleansing and refreshment through the waters of baptism in the river Jordan.

Crowds flock to him, and among them is Jesus. This is the unlikely thing, because Jesus is the one person who does not need the fresh start John is offering. After the water is poured on him, however, he receives something different from what comes upon John's other candidates for baptism. What Jesus receives is a kind of coronation: the Spirit comes down and settles on him like a dove, and there is a voice from heaven,

You are my Son, the beloved;
with you I am well pleased.

Let your imagination dwell on this scene: God, Jesus, the Dove descending; the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. Here we see what no-one can really explain but what Christians have always said about Jesus, that in him two worlds overlap: the world of human life, with all its hurt and trouble, and the world of God's life, a sea without a shore, an infinity of hope and healing.

John's call is to a troubled nation, and we know about that. I think of Mr Musk's recent [interventions in our nation's life](#); but, if I must choose one of our present troubles, it is the [devastation in Los Angeles](#) and its vision of the hotter, more hostile world we are entering.

There is also a happier connection with this scene: Jesus has been baptised, and so have I; so have many of you. If you have, this morning you stand where Jesus stands. And if you haven't, or if you were baptised as a child and have never endorsed your baptism by being confirmed, then do think about it.

On July 10th (closer that it seems) Sarah, Bishop of London, will come to us to baptise and confirm, and we shall soon be getting a group together. This group will be just the thing if you are trying faith for size, or if you want a 'refresher' on the fundamentals of Christian believing. And (though it doesn't have to) it can lead to being baptised or confirmed, or to reaffirming the promises you made when you were confirmed. What better time than New Year for resolving to take a new step of faith? That might be (as Gandalf puts it) 'quite an adventure'.

And if you have been baptised – perhaps confirmed too – then today, the Feast of the Baptism of Christ, is a perfect moment to recall the promises made then:

I turn to Christ.

I repent of my sins.

I renounce evil.

Why come here at all, unless you want to turn to Christ again, after all the other things that may have turned your head in the last week?

Or unless I want to repent of my sins, after the things that have gone wrong since we were all last here?

Or unless we want to renounce evil, when the headlines show how much the forces of evil have achieved these last seven days?

There are, of course, other reasons for coming to church: to meet friendly people, to be in a beautiful space; to be given (cliché coming) something to think about. Niall Ferguson, eminent historian and lifelong atheist who has now become a believer, gives some of his reasons in an [interview](#):

What strikes me, as a regular churchgoer now, not having been one before, is how much one learns every Sunday morning. Every hymn [for which you need to come to the 11 o'clock service here] contains some new clue as to the relationship

between us and God. I think the educational benefit of going to church almost equals the moral benefit, the uplift, the sense one gets of being somewhat reset.

I don't disagree with a word of that, but there is something going on that's deeper than education or morality. Deep down, crossing that church threshold leads you and me to stand where Jesus stands; to come into his space, where two worlds overlap, where we see how our world, with all its wounds and hopelessness, is infiltrated by the life of God.

It is an extraordinary thought, as you struggle to get up (or get others up) for church, as you gulp the tea and gobble the cereal, that these humdrum preliminaries bring you here, to a place where two worlds meet. And it doesn't stop when you cross the threshold in the other direction and go off to whatever awaits. To be in this place, to hear the voice of God in scripture and digest it, to take the life of Christ into ourselves in the bread and wine of Holy Communion, this will help us to remain in Jesus' space wherever we go.

Back in the Shire, before he starts out on his adventure, Bilbo Baggins reads his contract. It includes:

Present company shall not be liable for injuries including – but not limited to – laceration, evisceration, incineration...

They are, after all, going to face a dragon.

Please God, these are not things we are ever going to experience, and that is part of the point. Aristotle the Greek philosopher said that drama (on stage and now on screen) [‘purges’ us of emotions](#) like pity and fear. He seems to mean that we can experience these extreme feelings while watching others encounter extreme circumstances rather than encounter them ourselves.

But we can also identify with the events we watch. Baggins' ‘unexpected journey’ is perhaps one that you and I know. Ours may not be unexpected, and may feel less an adventure than an ordeal, yet what we see on the screen may remind us of a journey we have to take, perhaps even in the coming week: the journey to the exam hall or the interview, the walk to the dreaded meeting, the difficult conversation, or the doctor's surgery.

It may be an ordeal because you are at fault in some way; or it may be that, like Baggins – like Moses – you simply feel that more is about to be asked of you than you have it in you to give. We too have our dragons to face.

After his baptism, Jesus will make his own journey: into the wilderness (to be tested); back to his home town (which does not go well); to Jerusalem (for a showdown with the powerful) then to the cross and the grave; and then from death to new life.

Wherever your journey takes you, you'll never walk alone, because he has gone before, and in our testing moments we can recall those words we just heard addressed to Jesus, and hear them now addressed to us:

You are my daughter, my son, my beloved;
in you I am well pleased.

Can we? Yes: if (as we do in this service) we share in the body of Christ, then we are sons and daughters of God. And will God be pleased with us? Yes, not because any of us is perfect (we have as much need of a new start with God as anyone who came to John at the Jordan), but because in that moment our hearts will be open to God; because there, in that moment, there will be someone who wants to stand where Jesus stands, where two worlds meet.

Then, as we face whatever awaits us, the Spirit may rest upon *us*, giving us the words to speak and the silences to keep.