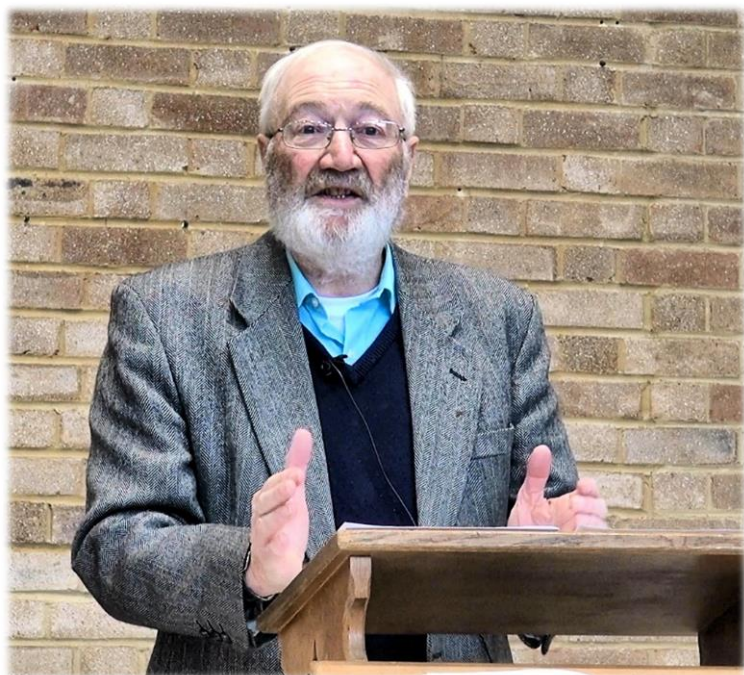


Morning Service Sunday 11th January – led by David Ramsay



This was Part-2 of the 'Ramsay Sandwich' - David having taken us through the 12 days of Christmas two Sundays ago. And the experience of preparing two Services had brought it home to him just what a debt of gratitude we owed to our regular worship leaders who did it every Sunday! David has had no formal training, something that perhaps allowed him to offer us a fresh perspective

This Sunday, the Church was commemorating the **Baptism of Jesus by John on the banks of the River Jordan.**

The Jordan, David told us, stretched around 150 miles from the Sea of Galilee to the Dead Sea, winding through a Rift Valley created by geological events millions of years ago. No one knew the exact spot where John baptised Jesus, but it was likely to have been near Nazareth. Jesus' baptism had marked the beginning of his ministry, which lasted about three years and transformed the world.

We'd just celebrated his birth and would soon be marking his death and resurrection at Easter. And it struck David that while we dedicated weeks to preparing for Christmas and Easter, we did not celebrate his baptism in the same way. It had marked a significant chapter in Jesus' life, and without it, the path of Christianity might have been very different (*if in fact it existed at all*).

John the Baptist had been the pivotal figure behind Jesus. We knew that John was Jesus' cousin, as Elizabeth his mother was Mary's sister. Both had been conceived around the same time—Mary by the Spirit of God, and Elizabeth in the usual manner. This suggested that they knew each other as they grew up, perhaps like cousins in a village. John had become a renowned Jewish preacher, baptising Jews. So before beginning his own ministry, Jesus had approached John for spiritual and ritual purification. This act had elevated John as a significant figure in both Christian and Jewish tradition, and he was also mentioned in other religions, such as Islam, the Druze faith, Mazdism, and the Bahá'í Faith. John and Jesus were mentioned several times in the Quran, written centuries after their deaths, described as prophets seeking to restore the Jews' relationship with God. John was regarded as a prophet by most major religions and had seen himself as the forerunner to Jesus – who according to Matthew had referred to John as Elijah, foretold in Malachi, and confirmed by Gabriel's announcement to Zechariah, John's father.

Though John had baptised Jesus, the Bible did not record Jesus himself as having baptised anyone: his disciples performed baptisms, while Jesus focused on healing and other miracles. Those baptised at the time remained Jews but committed themselves to living more spiritual, righteous lives—helping others, forgiving wrongs, and loving even their enemies—principles central to Jesus' teaching. Baptism had been reserved for adults, and had continued after Paul's conversion, as the Gospel spread to the Gentiles. Christians adapted baptism to welcome non-believers into the church. Between 160 and 200 AD, infant baptism had emerged, though not all denominations agreed on this.

So, as the church celebrated Jesus' baptism, it was fitting to emphasise John the Baptist's vital contribution. Without John, Jesus would not have undergone spiritual purification in the Jordan, which was

integral to his ministry. John had continued baptising during Jesus' ministry until his death by beheading, ordered by Herod. We read of his diet of locusts and wearing goatskins, but he had been much more than these details.

For David, if Jesus was the light, John had been the "switch" that illuminated the world by baptising him.

And I think he's right, because for me (and as recounted by Mark), his baptism was the moment that God broke through into Jesus's life, something that sent him off into the desert to come to terms with. And we know that Paul and Mohammed had similar experiences, including periods of isolation before they came to terms with their experiences. Without Paul, Christianity might not have spread the way it did. And Mohammed's similar experiences would have helped him recognise a fellow prophet in Jesus.

