

# The Parish of Bardsey with East Keswick

## Sermon

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### **Sunday 7 January 2024: Angela Hannafin**

Good morning and welcome to the first Sunday of 2024. Why not put down whatever you're doing, find a comfy chair and a quiet spot, so you can listen to whatever God might have to say to you? Today's reading is from Mark's gospel:

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<sup>4</sup>This messenger was John the Baptist. He was in the wilderness and preached that people should be baptized to show that they had repented of their sins and turned to God to be forgiven. <sup>5</sup>All of Judea, including all the people of Jerusalem, went out to see and hear John. And when they confessed their sins, he baptized them in the Jordan River. <sup>6</sup>His clothes were woven from coarse camel hair, and he wore a leather belt around his waist. For food he ate locusts and wild honey.

<sup>7</sup> John announced: "Someone is coming soon who is greater than I am—so much greater that I'm not even worthy to stoop down like a slave and untie the straps of his sandals. <sup>8</sup>I baptize you with water, but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit!"

<sup>9</sup>One day Jesus came from Nazareth in Galilee, and John baptized him in the Jordan River. <sup>10</sup>As Jesus came up out of the water, he saw the heavens splitting apart and the Holy Spirit descending on him like a dove. <sup>11</sup>And a voice from heaven said, "You are my dearly loved Son, and you bring me great joy.

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Today we remember the baptism of Christ. Baptism is a core part of our Christian discipleship. The apostle Paul gives us a definition of discipleship as "imitating Christ". Little babies are totally dependent on their carers, and grow as they watch and copy them. Believers of Christ are encouraged to forge a lifestyle which copies Jesus'. So it follows that this includes baptism. Our own baptisms may have taken place many years ago when we were children, or babies, or when we were older. We may remember a lot, or very little. No matter. God remembers it all. I saw a family recently whose child had been baptised by a visiting priest in our parish while I was away. I'd

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heard that the child was almost fully submerged, a tradition not typical of our parish but one which made the baptism truly memorable to all present! The symbolism of going into the water and coming out, reminds us of the sinful life we have been freed from and the new life that God has given us. Today is a day to reflect on what it means to be baptised, on all that God has given us, and as I've said before, to give thanks for those who made baptism promises on our behalf and who have supported and prayed for us as we have grown from baby Christians. Why not send a card or a text to say thank you to those people after listening to this sermon? By the way, if you've not been baptised yet, it's never too late!

I think there's something important to go back to in today's reading though. This scripture is only one of two occasions in all of the gospels when we hear God's voice. One of these occasions was when Jesus was baptised and the other is what we call the 'transfiguration', when Jesus took a few of his disciples to the top of a mountain for a spiritual experience, when he was 'transfigured' and they had a glimpse of his future glory. At both of these events God audibly spoke and was heard, according to the gospel writers. We don't know what God sounded like, whether he had a deep voice or a soft one, but the gospel writers record that he was heard by those present. At the baptism, God says that Jesus is his dearly beloved Son, who brings him great joy. I think this is really important. We know that Jesus was baptised before his ministry began, so at this event God is speaking words of love even when Jesus hasn't done anything significant. So the first thing we can take out of this passage is that this shows us that God loves us unconditionally. We do not need to do anything to earn his love because Jesus was perfectly loved by the Father before he did anything. In fact, if we just sat in a chair tomorrow and never moved, God couldn't love us any less. His love for us is based on who we are – all individuals to be marvelled at, because we are, as the psalmist wrote, "fearfully and wonderfully made". For those of us who like being busy, this is not an easy scripture to read, since it challenges our idea of the 'Protestant Work Ethic'. In other words, many of us still are driven by our own need to achieve and find it hard to receive God's unconditional love. Maybe if this is you, a suitable response may be to willingly programme in some times of reflection this week. Why not, for a few minutes each day, make yourself not do anything, apart from sitting with God and remembering that you are loved as you are.

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Secondly, I'm wondering why God chose to speak to Jesus. If Father, Son and Holy Spirit exist in perfection anyway, why did God need to speak out loud? Is it because the words of the Father sustained the Son? Did Jesus receive pleasure in hearing the voice of his Father? Perhaps this reminds us that, like Jesus, we are in relationship with God. Relationship with anyone can never be a one-way street. Good relationships always involve learning to listen to someone else and not the sort of poor listening we often do. Sadly, we are often thinking about our own response when someone else is talking. It is hard to listen unselfishly. Have a think about whether you do this, as most of us do. And so it is with our Christian life. Yes, of course, our own prayers are important, but we all need to learn to listen to God. This doesn't mean we will hear an audible voice. Some Christians do, although it's rare. If he just used an audible voice all the time we'd never have to learn to listen. God wants us to learn to come close to him to hear him, which is why forging distinct time with him is so important. God speaks through his word, through other people, through our thoughts, through dreams, through music, even through creation.

Thirdly, how can God speak to us as a church? By that, I mean a group of believers, or whatever local group you may be part of, if you're listening. This is the area which all churches need to grow in, since the growth of individualism threatens our church community. Church can never be just a place where we come as individuals, but is an expression of the corporate culture we belong to as Christians. We are the body of Christ. Community activities like bible study, discussion and prayer are areas where we can hear God together. Last year we held a prayer course over eight weeks. One of the main areas of growth, and one of the things that really struck me, was hearing people share their own spiritual experiences together in a group, something people hadn't really done in our parish. It's the role of every priest or key leader of a church to facilitate corporate listening together. This promotes our unity and enables us to know what God wants us to do and how we are to live.

I'm just going to give a blatant plug at this point for those of you who are local. Our Lent Course covers five Tuesdays from 20<sup>th</sup> February from 7-8-pm, and we'll be meeting at East Keswick Methodist Church. We're going to be thinking about how to hear God together and hopefully learning how to improve our ability. Perhaps you have other ways you know you can draw

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near to God. That's the main way we can hear God because as James tells us, in his book in the bible, when we draw near to God he will draw near to us. When did you last hear God? Like daily bread, this should be a regular part of our diet.

It's my prayer that 2024 will be a year when we all learn to hear God's voice individually and together. That we will know God's unconditional love for us all and that voice, that precious voice, that tells us that we are all loved and that each of us bring God joy. **AMEN.**