Our Gospel reading is Mark 1:4-11

“You are my son, the Beloved, with you I am well pleased”

Our gospel reading today comes from St Mark, who begins the story of Jesus not with his birth, but in his baptism. That is significant. We believe that Mark was the first gospel to be written, it is likely he wrote for Christians who were facing hostility and persecution. So he sets out to tackle a difficult question.

If Jesus is the Son of God why did he die on a cross? And if Jesus is the Son of God why are those who believe in him suffering also?

You see the dilemma. If Jesus is the Son of God how can his life end on a cross, and how can those who follow him face persecution? Surely if Jesus is who he says he is, then Christians ought to be powerful and successful and the world ought to believe and be better.

So Mark writes his gospel rooting Jesus in the ministry of John the Baptist, who like the prophets before him came to a sticky end. John, you will recall, was beheaded by Herod.

The Jesus story begins for Mark not in a stable but in a river, at his baptism. This is the defining moment when Jesus leaves home to begin his public ministry. It is a turning point. It is the same turning point for those who have chosen to follow Jesus, who like him have entered the river and emerged baptised, members of a new community.

Mark takes care to remind us that at every step, in every encounter, Jesus faced hostility and opposition. Immediately after his baptism he is driven into the wilderness to endure temptation and hardship. The way of Christ is not the way of easy success and worldly power. The world can be changed, but it has to be changed the hard way. From within.

Most of us probably never decided to be baptised. I was baptised by the Revd Harold Dawson, Vicar of St Mark, Glodwick, my grandfather, in the font of St Nicholas, Blundellsands, on 26 March 1961. It was the church where my parents were married. I was later confirmed there by Bishop Stuart Blanch, who having laid his hands on my head was instantly elevated to become Archbishop of York. I am sure that was no coincidence.

I have not the slightest memory of my baptism – as I suppose is true for many of us. In Mark’s day things were different. Baptism was a life changing decision. If you chose to be baptised you became a target for arrest, torture and execution. It was not something people undertook lightly.

Mark begins the story of Jesus with the same experience as those who choose to follow him – baptism is a life changing moment.

The odd thing of course is that Jesus didn’t need to be baptised. He was born a Jew, this identity was his from birth, baptism was how foreigners, outsiders, became members of God’s chosen people.

And of course Jesus didn’t need to be baptised by John because John’s baptism was a baptism of repentance – that those who had turned away from God were given a second chance. Through the water of baptism the disobedient were brought back, the estranged reconciled. That surely didn’t apply to Jesus.

So when Jesus came to John – John was at first appalled. You have no need of this baptism. But Jesus insisted. This is God’s way – a path of humility, sacrifice, obedience, love. These are the tools by which the world is offered a new beginning.

We take our inheritance too lightly if we take baptism too lightly. We may not have chosen to be baptised, but we must choose whether we live the life that this baptism offers us. And the path of that life runs against the grain of this world.

As Jesus came up out of the water two things happened. Firstly the Holy Spirit came to him as a dove. That doesn’t mean a bird landed on his head. If it did baptism then services would be far more interesting. This is an epiphany moment – things are made clear.

This is a moment of decision. To leave the safety of a family home and begin the public ministry that leads to the cross.

This is a moment of identification. Jesus had no need to repent, but this is a journey that leads people back towards God. Jesus takes the first step on that journey himself, as a shepherd leads the flock.

This is a moment of equipment. All of us will have experienced times in our life when we have faced a challenge when we didn’t know what to do. As we get older we become less confident about tackling the unknown. Younger people have a much greater capacity to tackle the unknown with confidence. God is always in the moments when we take on the impossible. Some of the best churchwardens I have worked with have been people who told me they had no idea what was involved, and felt they were totally inadequate for the job.

God does not call us to the easy. He calls us to the hard. But he does not leave us unequipped. The gift of the Spirit comes in many forms.

This is a moment of approval. You are my Son, the Beloved, with you I am well pleased. Henri Nouwen said that this was the moment that identified Jesus and everything he did. The whole of his life is living the identity of being God’s beloved. Everything he did was seeking that same identity in every person he met.

You and I may not remember our own baptism, but we share these moments.

A moment of decision, made daily to take our baptism seriously, to know that we belong to an alternative community.

A moment of identification, to walk the Godward journey in the company of Christ and in the fellowship of others.

A moment of equipment, to face the uncertainties and impossibilities in the faith that God does not call us to anything that is beyond his ability to support us.

A moment of approval – that you are God’s beloved, with you he is well pleased. And to seek that in everyone.

Father eternal, cleanse and renew us each day by the power of your Spirit, that the goodness of the incarnate Lord may be seen in our lives; fill the Church, and the whole world, with the light, joy, and peace of his birth, that his second coming in glory may be hastened, and all creation perfected in his eternal kingdom; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.