

**Sermon Luke 3.15-17, 21-22 / Revd Paula Lehtinen**  
**First Sunday of Epiphany, Jesus's baptism, 12.1.2025,**  
**All saints Anglican Church of Luxembourg**

May I speak in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit.

“...The people were filled with expectation...”, tells the Gospel.

The first decades of our era were quite tense times in the Palestine region, politically and religiously, and among other things, people were speculating on the old Messiah prophecies in the Holy Scriptures.

Their fulfilment had been expected for centuries, but in the last few decades all kind of stories and rumours about exceptional things had been circulating in the country.

Some people remembered those weird shepherds who had claimed having seen an angel, and then found a baby boy lying in a manger, in some backyard stable around Bethlehem. Someone else pointed out that stories about angel visions in Jerusalem temple had been going around, too. One of the priests had suddenly turned mute, and a special child was included also in that story.

And people couldn't forget those horrible days in Bethlehem, when the King's soldiers had appeared out of blue, and killed all boys under two in the village. That had left behind a still bleeding wound in the Judean hill country.

Some connected that tragedy with the appearance of three foreigners, men who could read the stars, from faraway Eastern realms. They were said to have followed a new star foretelling the birth of a mighty king, and those living in Jerusalem had seen them entering Herod's palace. Well, there was a wild rumour about them carrying gold, myrh and frankincense into some old stable in Bethlehem, but that was a too odd story for anyone to believe...

Oh, well, all that had happened long ago, and everyday life was still more or less the same for ordinary folk.

But on the other hand, there was this amazing prophet who had recently appeared on the banks of river Jordan, John the Baptist he was called. And no one could deny that he was a powerful preacher, a real Man of God of old times!

Of course, every able man wanted to see him and hear him speak! Even Pharisees and Sadducees had been seen descending into the river to be baptised by him, even though they had to queue for their turn with all kind of sinners.

Yes, all this made one think... Could he be the promised Messiah, could he...? The one who would, at last, overthrow the enemy, and bring the lasting peace?

Many had declared themselves to be one, but every time the hope put on them had failed.

The situation I just described is not such foreign to us today, is it?

The atmosphere of speculation, rumours and facts happily mixed, uncertainty and worry, hoping for change, longing for peace. That's us, more or less.

Of course, we do live in a world in many ways different than in those days, and yet, many things and situations look very similar now, to what they were then.

“The people were filled with expectation.” With these words of the Gospel of Luke, one could begin nearly any news feed of today. All kind of things have happened lately, and are happening just now. Some incidents took place a longer time ago, but we are starting to understand their significance and true nature only now. We may remember details that once sounded too unbelievable to be taken seriously, good and bad, and still... now we are not so sure any longer.

And we, too, we are hoping for peace, looking for someone who would end all the enmities. There are many candidates with different agendas, some of them genuine, some acting for their own selfish goals.

No wonder, we are often confused, sometimes feeling utterly tired and powerless, sometimes even too eager to follow those making the biggest noise. Should we look here or there, or somewhere in between?

The time difference between now and then, between us and them, is huge, but we are both asking the same question: In whom should we put our hope? And the answer has remained the same through time. As Christians, we do not believe in God in general. We believe in God who became man in Jesus Christ. John the Baptist, and those with him by the Jordan river, when Jesus was baptised, witnessed the answer to our question in a quite miraculous way. The Gospel passage tells us, how the heaven was opened, and God Triune – the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit – was present among people. God has given us Jesus, in whom he ties himself with his own creation, in time, in place, and in all phases of our life.

Much has happened over the centuries; there has been good times and bad times. All along the way there has been a cloud of witnesses who have patiently kept their focus on him who said (John 14.6): “I am the way, the truth and the life.” The hope put in Jesus has stayed alive through happy times and through dark times, until it has reached us now. God has been committed to the past generations, and now, in this time, in this place, in this world situation, he is committed to us. We are baptised with the same baptism as Jesus, in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. The heaven was open also at the moment of our baptism, and we were taken into God’s family. We are followers of Jesus, walking on the way, children of truth, inheritors of life. It is our turn to keep the faith and pass on the hope.

We know all this, don’t we? Still, even though we often remind ourselves of to whom we belong, we find it sometimes difficult to navigate among all that is happening in the world, and in our personal life.

Why? How? Where? To which direction?

For not to get lost, it is essential to stay connected with him whom we are following. We have been given means to do so, something that is always in hand, and possible to everyone. We find that something in the description of Jesus’s baptism: “... when Jesus had been baptized **and was praying**, the heaven was opened...” When Jesus prayed the connection with Father God was open.

Let's follow our leader also in this!

We are meant to keep close to him, as where Jesus is, the heaven is always open. When Jesus died on the cross, the curtain between God's holy throne and us, his creation, was torn down (Matth. 27.50-51). The way to God is permanently open to everyone who wishes to step in with Jesus.

Let's accept, and use, this enormous gift, the gift of prayer.

In the words of the Epistle to Hebrews (Hebr. 4:16): "Let us then approach the throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need."

The Bible tells us several times that Jesus prayed. He needed the continuous connection with Father God to live the life he was meant to live on the Earth. So do we.

Two details in Luke's description caught my attention.

Firstly, the acts of listening and hearing are important on the scene. The voice of God was heard, and its message noted.

Jesus listened to his Father's voice throughout his life, seeking always God's will.

I may not be very wrong, if I say that listening is the part of prayer that many of us find difficult, the part that we often forget, or just ignore because time is running and we need to go. We have a long list of people and things we wish to leave in God's care, but when we should stop to listen, well, time is up and other duties call. And there is nothing wrong in lifting to God all our joys and sorrows; we are encouraged and invited to do so!

But practising the skill of listening, and hearing, might be a good and beneficial idea; especially in times like these, when emotions and outer pressures so easily tend to dictate our direction and goals.

Secondly, I began to wonder about the Holy Spirit who descended on Jesus in the form of a dove.

Where does that Spirit of peace and love move now, in midst of the challenges of our time?

What form does the Spirit take in the battles and challenges of today?

How, and through whom, does the Spirit of reconciliation enter the scenes of discordance these days?

So many questions – and the answers?

There is something Jesus says in the Sermon of the Mount (Matth. 7.16): "By their fruit you will recognize them."

Jesus teaches Nikodemus in these words (John 3.8): "The wind blows wherever it pleases.

You hear its sound, but you cannot tell where it comes from or where it is going. So it is with everyone born of the Spirit."

We have been given the gift of prayer, so that we can learn to hear the sound of the Spirit, and to walk in God's guidance. In our baptism, we have been born of the Spirit through Jesus Christ who says (Isaiah 43.1): "Fear not, for I have redeemed you; I have summoned you by name; you are mine."

May we be willing to hear, see and act according to his will.

Amen.