

AT FIRST glance, camel-hair clothing and eating locusts sounds less like scripture than like a challenge on *I'm a Celebrity: Get me out of here*. But I am told that anyone who's ever worn a camel coat or knitted with camel-hair fibre will know what an indulgent luxury it is. Perhaps the Baptist deliberately chose only the scratchy hair on the surface of the pelt rather than the soft fluff beneath. We will never know.

John's baptism of Jesus marks the beginning of Jesus' ministry. It also shaped later Christian expectations of what a baptism should be. There must be water; then, on coming up out of the water, there would be the Holy Spirit.

What Christians now expect can be a bit different: not water followed by the Spirit, but water baptism 'in' or 'with' the Spirit. And if we're not careful we can skip over the water bit and go straight to the Spirit. We ought to be noticing, though, that even Spirit baptism requires water. The descent of the Spirit upon Jesus comes after immersion in the Jordan: it does not replace it.

Christian Spirit baptism, then, incorporates water baptism. Faith is about seeing the meaning under, or within, ordinary things. It is not about dismissing ordinary things, because God has chosen to work through them, not in spite of them.

We see water and the Spirit at work in our Old Testament reading too. 'In the beginning', we read, 'the Spirit of God was hovering over the waters'. The Hebrew word translated Spirit is wonderfully onomatopoeic: 'Ruach' (with a guttural gasp on the 'ch'). It can equally mean Spirit, wind or breath. All denote a living, dynamic and creative force which brought our universe into being and which is seen again at the beginning of Jesus' ministry in his baptism.

So today is about beginnings: the creation of the universe, the start of Jesus' ministry and the first month of 2021, a year which opens with mounting fear about a spreading virus and the fragility of democracy in the United States.

The creation, too, was an uncertain process. The world was 'formless and empty'. In a dramatic act God brings light into being, and we know from that moment that we are on an upward curve, that light wins over darkness. But

creation doesn't happen in an instant. It takes God six aeons, six ages to complete: we know from scientific discovery that each of these aeons was hundreds of millions of years long. And we know that his creative force is still at work in our world and in our lives, in the beauty of nature and in the wonder of new birth. We also know that the delicate balance of nature is under threat from human activity, which is why we want to play our own part in carbon reduction by becoming an Eco Church – more of that later.

After the heady experience of his baptism Jesus is sent into the uncertainty of the wilderness, where he is tempted to question God's purposes for him. And his whirlwind ministry through the Galilee region which we read about in Mark 1 & 2 leads, as early as Mark 3.6, to the opposition to him crystallising in this: 'Then the Pharisees went out and began to plot with the Herodians how they might kill Jesus.'

Which all points to an understanding, if it even needs saying, that at the beginning of 2021 we have some dark months ahead of us before we see light, the hope of release from our imprisonment by the rapid roll out of effective vaccines. But hope we have, not just because of scientific breakthroughs but because we are resurrection people, convinced by our faith in the victory of light over darkness, seen both at the creation of the world and in the events of Easter. 'He is risen!' we shout, not just at Easter but every Sunday, and not because we believe that he will *take away* death and suffering; it is *through* his death and suffering that Christ transforms our lives for the better. Just as through total submersion in the deep waters of the river Jordan he rises to receive the blessing of the Spirit.

The world is in a mess, with pandemic, hunger, political turbulence and climate change at large. We may think our lives are in a mess too, with freedoms restricted, plans put on hold and the mental strain of living at close quarters taking its toll. Let us take courage in new beginnings and look forward to the day when we and the whole world will be set free from our bondage to disease, sin and evil. And let us play our part, however small, in bringing that day closer.