

Connecting faith and daily life

William Hepper *reflects on Mark 1:4-11*

Today's Gospel reading introduces us to John the Baptist, Jesus' cousin. John was a distinctive character, who, in the verses preceding today's reading, is referred to as God's messenger, sent ahead of Jesus to prepare the way. Furthermore, his slightly bizarre attire of camel's hair and a leather belt, and his not entirely appetising diet of locusts and honey, are not added as humorous touches, but reflect the image of the Old Testament character, Elijah. Thus the Baptist stands firmly in the ancient tradition of the prophet sent by God, to bring God's word to God's people.

As his title reflects, another aspect of John's ministry was to baptise in the river Jordan those who responded with contrition and repentance to his preaching. And it was to John at the Jordan that Jesus came seeking baptism. The accounts in other Gospels show John as understandably embarrassed by this request, since Jesus is the one sent from God, who, John feels, should be the one to baptise him. In the event John does baptise Jesus. But this raises the question of why Jesus, the sinless Saviour, would need baptism, which is commonly understood as a ritual of washing and purification from sin.

The best answer we can give is that Jesus' baptism was not about washing away sins, but signified Jesus' full identification with the ordinary people among whom he lived. Such an identification continues to apply today for those who commit themselves to following him. 😊

He became one of us



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Lord God we thank you for Jesus' humble identification with the people of his day. Help us to be your agents in today's world, identifying with those who are poor or powerless. Amen.

New Year resolutions

by Heather Cooke

Did you make any New Year resolutions for 2024? Broken any yet? If so, you're not alone. Many of us make these pledges each year, but few manage to keep them. Perhaps even fewer realise that the custom may have religious origins. From ancient Babylonians making promises to their gods, through Romans vowing to Janus (from

whom January takes its name) and right up to Watch Night services in some Christian churches today, each new year has been greeted with promises to do better.

Do you ever make resolutions concerning Christian discipleship – prayer, Bible study, Christian service? And would it help you keep them if you thought in terms of a promise made to God? After all, our faith is built upon promises.

God made covenants with humanity in the Old Testament, and Jesus said: "I am with you always." What can we promise in return this year? 😊

“Resolution One: I will live for God. Resolution Two: If no one else does, I still will.”

Jonathan Edwards (1703-1758), American revivalist preacher, philosopher and theologian

Plants in the Bible

The cedar

by Caroline Fletcher

The cedar trees of Lebanon are mentioned more than seventy times in the Old Testament. Cedars are huge coniferous trees with massive girths. They can reach up to 121 foot in height and have horizontal branches with huge sweeping spreads. They are also extremely long-lasting, some living a thousand years or more.

Cedars were prized for their beautiful wood, which is strong, aromatic and resistant

to rot. Large amounts of it were imported from Lebanon to build King Solomon's Temple, Solomon being able to afford the very best materials.

Their size, strength and beauty are reasons why cedars are used to describe how the righteous flourish (for example, Psalm 92:12). However, the proud cedar is also a negative image representing haughty, foreign leaders who do not acknowledge God (Ezekiel 31:1-12). Such pride is always overcome: Psalm 29:5 says that just God's voice alone can fell the mighty cedar. 😊