Today we have heard about the baptism of Jesus. But I wonder what we mean today when we talk about baptism or christening as it is also called. What do we believe is happening when the vicar baptises in the name of the Father, the Son and the holy Spirit.

John the Baptist has cut an unconventional figure as the forerunner of the coming Messiah. The promised Messiah is coming soon, he tells people, and urges them to be baptised in the River Jordan as a sign of their repentence and resolve to do better. Then along comes Jesus and John recognises him. Here he is, he announces, Here is the one who is much greater than me.
And what does Jesus do then? Does he demand instant worship and obedience as the sort of Messiah it seems the people were expecting? Does he launch into an immediate display of miraculous powers? No. Instead, he simply asks to be baptised as well. And after an understandable, intial reluctance, John does as requested and Matthew tells us there was a voice from heaven, "This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased." Next, Matthew will tell us of the Temptation of Christ in the desertand after that Jesus' public ministry really begins.

But before we can understand what this reading is telling us about baptism today, we need to go back a bit. What does the baptism of Jesus tell us about Jesus himself?
And what would the crowd of onlookers have made of it?

For starters then, what would the onlookers have made of Jesus' baptism? For the Jews, baptism was a rite used to welcome new converts to the Jewish faith and to welcome back those who had fallen away from it and from its observances. So, there in the River Jordan,Jesus, who John had just proclaimed as the coming Messiah, was effectively aligning himself with the renegade and the outcast. And so, straight awayhe set the scene for his future ministry.

The baptisms of John, then, were all about repentence and preparation for what was to come. Repentence was also no doubt part of early Christian baptisms, but in addition, the rite marked new membership as more and more people became followers of the Way.

And, 2000 years later, these are both still part of baptism into the Christian church .Baptism is rite of initiation into faith, an affirmation that the person, whether an adult or a child is a member of God's family and loved by him as a part of the Church. But repentence and turning again to God are also an important part of the service and the baptism promises.

But reflecting on this morning's reading and the way in which Jesusis already making a powerful statement about his future ministry, I believe baptism can be about so much more than this. The baptism of Jesus takes us straight to the heart of what we call the incarnation, that in the person of Jesus, God became fully human. And Jesus came to John, not as you'd expect God's Son to come ,but as an ordinary man. No - not even that as he was part of a rite that was usually associated with the outsider and the fallen and in doing so, he identified himself fully with mess and unsatisfactoriness of the human condition.

In baptism, we come, not to celebrate our membershipof a chosen group, but as a sign that we are invited to join with Christ in his work of reconciling to God a humanity that is constantly falling away from the kind of life, and kinds of relationships, God wants for us.

In the baptism service, the newly baptised are given a candle as a sign that they are to reflect the light of Christ in the world. The light of a Christ who came for all sinners regardless of how

inadequate they may feel, regardless of race or status, and regardless of what they have done in the past. And in our baptism we are acknowledging being part of a community of believers called to do the same.

And so my prayer for us this morning, is that in the love of God, following the example of the Son and inspired by the Holy Spiri, we may truly reflect the light of Christ in a world that is so often in darkness.

Amen.