

Matthew 3:13-17

*St Peter's Kinver, 11th January 2026
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In our old house we used to have a pair of doves who would spend most of the Spring attempting to build a nest on top of the security light over our front door. Now given that the space on top of the light was barely big enough for a single dove to sit on, let alone two doves and a structurally sound nest, it's no surprise that every few days we would find a pile of twigs as the latest homebuilding attempt was either blown, or knocked, off onto the doorstep.

It was, at the same time, sad, inspiring, and absolutely hilarious, and when we popped by to see the house when we were in the area last year, we were delighted to see a little pile of sticks on the floor by the front door as evidence that those doves had still not given up.

Doves are beautiful birds, but they are not the cleverest of creatures! And so, as I read today's Gospel reading in preparation for this sermon, I found myself pondering why – of all the possible options – at Jesus's baptism the Holy Spirit descended on him as a dove?! This is his baptism, the beginning of his public ministry, one of the absolute high points of his earthly life, the moment where his calling is literally announced by God, and it's marked... by a pigeon?

So I've done some research, and I want to suggest a few things that the Holy Spirit taking the form of a dove tells us about what Jesus was called to do, and about what we are called to do.

The first reference to doves in the Bible – does anybody know?

Genesis chapter 8, Noah's Ark, as the flood waters recede Noah sends out a Raven first of all who very sensibly gets as far away from the boat full of predators as it can and doesn't come back. So then Noah sends out a dove who flies around for a bit then comes back empty handed (or, empty beaked I suppose), a few days later Noah does the same and this time the dove brings back an olive branch, a symbol that the flood is over and dry land is nearby.

There's an old poem known as "The song of Noah's Dove", and in this poem the anonymous poet tells of the dove flying "forth from Noah's Ark over the churning wave on the breath of hope" The dove is a sign of hope. A sign that God's long-awaited promises are being fulfilled. Hope has always been essential to human existence, and Jesus's ministry was characterised by offering hope to those who would otherwise have none – the outcasts, the forgotten, the overlooked, the downtrodden.

Flying forth over the churning wave on the breath of hope. That is what Jesus was called to do, and that is what we are called to do too. To speak hope in a darkening world.

And so the dove is a sign of hope. What else? Well doves are also pretty funny birds!

I've already told you about the pair of doves over our old front door, and anyone who spends any time watching the pigeons in a city centre will soon know how comical they are! There are a few mentions of doves in the Old Testament, but my favourite has to be Hosea 7:11 which says in one very studious translation "Ephraim has become like a dove, silly and without sense" but the same verse in our pew bibles puts it much more earthly, saying "Israel flits around like a silly pigeon"

There is something inherently unserious about pigeons, and I think we see some of that characteristic in Jesus's ministry too. Of course Jesus took his mission seriously, but he also was funny! He made jokes about camels fitting through needles and people walking around with planks of wood poking out of their eyes. He had a sense of humour, because God has a sense of humour (how else could you create a world that contains squirrels?!) Jesus didn't take himself too seriously. He laughed and joked with his friends, and enjoyed life. And we should too.

Yes there are serious things going on in our lives, our community, our world, and we should think seriously about those things. But we should also laugh, and joke, and enjoy ourselves, because that's what Jesus did. We should be more like silly pigeons sometimes!

The dove is a sign of hope. The dove is a sign of humour. The dove is also a sign of humility.

The Romans often thought of birds as auguries, signs from the Gods, and the appearance of a bird at important moments carried a lot of meaning. Shortly before Tiberius became emperor in AD14, it was said that an eagle landed on the roof of his house. Likewise, when Claudius, who would go on to become Emperor in AD41, first entered the Forum to begin his public career, the historian Suetonius records that "an eagle swooped down and perched on his shoulder".

The arrival of a bird to mark the beginning of a public ministry was a significant event. What is interesting about Jesus's experience though, is that in Roman society the Dove was often used as the exact counterpoint to the eagle – the eagle is strong but the dove is weak, the dove is shy but the eagle is brave. And so to be announced by the arrival of a dove, rather than an eagle, says something of Jesus's humility. He is not coming as an all powerful conquering hero – though of course he is indeed all powerful. Rather he comes in humility and peace.

We see in our world today the consequences of having leaders who wield their power over others. Men like Donald Trump, Vladimir Putin, Benjamin Netanyahu, who drop their bombs and kill their citizens and would love nothing more than to be seen to have an eagle land on their shoulder like some cruel Roman emperor. But the way of Jesus is not that way. His rule is one of peace and humility. And that is a world that we must work for, that is the life that we must live. We must be doves, not eagles.

And alongside that, the dove is also a sign of poverty. Psalm 74, in a piece of typical Hebrew parallelism, says "Do not deliver the soul of your dove to the wild animals; and do not forget the life of your poor forever."

In the Jewish customs, when a child was born the parents – according to Leviticus 5 – had to go and make an offering at the temple of a lamb and a pigeon. However if they cannot afford a sheep then they can take two pigeons instead. Pigeons were then, as they are now, plentiful, and so they were the offering of poverty. When Jesus was born what did Mary and Joseph take as their offering to the temple? Not a lamb, but two pigeons. A sign of their poverty.

And yet, as the Spirit descends on Jesus in the form of a dove – the pauper’s offering – the values of the world are turned upside down, as Jesus would do again and again and again in his life and ministry. The weak are made strong and the poor are made rich. The first will be last and the last will be first. The meek will inherit the earth, the merciful will receive mercy, and the peacemakers will be called children of God.

When Jesus had been baptized, just as he came up from the water, suddenly the heavens were opened to him and he saw God’s Spirit descending like a dove – a sign of hope, a sign of humour, and a sign of humility – descending like a dove and alighting on him. And a voice from the heavens said, “This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased”

May we know the Holy Spirit descending on us like a dove today too.

May we fly forth over the churning wave on the breath of hope.

May we be more like silly pigeons sometimes.

And may we seek to be doves, not eagles, to live lives of peace and humility, finding in the poverty of the world the riches of God’s grace.

Hope. Humour. Humility.

Maybe the doves are onto something after all!

Amen.