

Baptism of Christ

'You are my beloved'

Today we keep the Feast of the Baptism of Christ. And we are reminded that the same light which forged creation in our Genesis story, is the light of Jesus, and the light which we receive at our own Baptism. We hear the beginning of the Genesis story today I think because the Baptism of Christ is about the regeneration of creation. Indeed, *'The significance of Genesis is that it contains the picture of an idea which Christ proved in living out...What is called the resurrection of the dead is a remaking of their life, in a stuff and in a fashion which are known to God alone'* (Farrer). Today's readings remind us that the Light still shines in our lives and in all of God's creation, even at dark times, such as our global pandemic and the swirling fears that consume; the challenges and opportunities of Brexit, and the dark accusations and counter-accusations in the United States.

Into this, our, very situation, the Baptism of Christ speaks as God acclaims 'You are my beloved'. The scene of the gospel is out in the wilderness. Mark sets the new movement against Jerusalem, the seat of the religious and political leaders. Maybe we can catch a glimpse of it when we venture out for our once a day exercise. So often recently I've seen the centre of Witney quiet and abandoned, and then get out to Hailey Wood, Curbridge or the river around Minster Lovell and you see lots of people (all suitably spatially distanced, I'm sure!).

In our story, we find in this countryside 'the whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem'. Mark presents John in the clothes of Elijah, wearing camel hair and a leather belt (cf 2Kings 1.8). And don't forget we are at the river Jordan, where Elijah and Elisha met to pass the prophetic mantle. (Just as we meet together on this day and the mantle of Ross passes on to each of us to pick up where he left off - to continue his passion for young peoples' ministry, such as our Young Disciples our schools ministry and much besides). This is, of course, also the same river that Moses looked out across to see the promised land: so the layers of meaning are awesomely rich. And

here in today's gospel story, Jesus receives a divine blessing as his public ministry begins.

In parenthesis, we could get caught up in the detail of John's baptism as a means of Jewish cleansing and renewal versus later Christian Baptismal rites. But I think it's enough to say that for Mark he invites each listener to be pulled into the story and identify with the one to be baptised as the Spirit descends and a voice proclaims, 'You are my beloved child, with you I am well pleased'.

The important bit here is that our baptism - and our continual re-conversion - is all about re-orientation. To pick up Ross's question last week, how do *you* follow the star? How does your life take on the shape and form of Christ as we reflect on the new creation we receive through baptism? As God continues to move over the waters of chaos in our lives.

To continue our focus on Baptism for a moment, John Chrysostom in the 4th century said, *'When we immerse our head in water, just as if in a grave, the old person is buried, and having sunk down, is entirely hidden once for all; that, when we emerge, a new person arise again. Just as it is easy for us to be immersed and to emerge, so it is easy for God to bury the old person and raise up the new.'*

For us as Christians, baptism is important as it puts us in the place of Christ. We become part of Christ's body. Titus describes baptism as 'the laver of regeneration' (Titus 3.5); it is an antitype of the Exodus (as we see in 1 Cor 10.1-2). It is us being born again from above (John 3.5). And above all, Baptism is the giving of the Spirit - which is the principle of the Christian Life. Furthermore, it is a lifelong work, as the Anglican divine Jeremy Taylor said, *'We may be soon washed, but to be healed is the work of a long cure.'*

That is why we have the Eucharist. The link between Baptism and Eucharist is inseparable and so a word about our Eucharistic life in these Covid times. The Eucharist remains a pivotal place in the mission of the Church. You may well have heard me speak often of it being like a petrol station where we renew the grace we received in Baptism, and are re-charged to go out to the world. What never ends is our receiving the grace of Christ, our growing up into the image of Christ, until we see the face of Christ for ourselves (Farrer).

This still stands in these Covid times. What is in even sharper focus is what is called the Spiritual Communion prayer - focusing on the fact that we still gain grace from the Eucharist even when we are not able to be in spatial proximity. Some weeks we have a full Eucharist in our Zoom service, on

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other weeks, a member of the Ministry Team says a Eucharist on behalf of the whole benefice and then we use the host from that service to offer Benediction (literally blessing) for that moment of spiritual communion. This moment identifies us with the Crucified One and draws us closer to God as we renew that grace within ourselves. What I am learning in this time is that, whilst I used to think I had to be close in space and time, I can now be united across space in time. Indeed, more accurately to be united across space and across time.

The New Testament makes plain that in Christ we see the future creation is already initiated. We have to interpret all in the light of Jesus. So the liberation theologian Boff says, *'wherever people seek the good, justice, humanitarian love, solidarity, community and understanding, wherever they dedicate themselves to overcoming egoism to make this world more human... in opening themselves up to the normative transcendent in their lives, there we can say the resurrected one is present'*.

This is why the selfishness of some at this time is so depressing. The egotistical, 'I'm alright Jack (or Jill)' which fails to think of the consequences 5 people down the line with Covid, is not a compelling example as our NHS is overrun.

What is, is the way that some in society are reaching out to those in need in our communities is where we see an alignment with Christ who offered the kingdom to the poor and persecuted. And truly it is here that the Trinity, in whose names we are baptised, is immersed in us.

The Eucharist then is a place where the costliness of participation in acts of mercy and kindness, and the activity of God in history, are acclaimed and celebrated. For here we see the fruits of insistence of love being manifested in concrete actions. Words are not enough. And yet I am learning that the simple action of tracing the sign of the cross with the sacrament, when I too trace a cross on myself, reminding myself of the cross we all receive at our Baptism, is truly a Sacrament(al) encounter. And I find that it is here that we see the lifting of a small corner of what Newman called the curtain hung over our futurity.

It is here that we are reminded to pray for hope for our future world. Here we gain strength to remain open to the future. And it challenges us to seek ways to make a difference in our present situation, preeminently recalling us to the mystery of the encounter with God amongst the poor. And it is a place of re-orientation and healing, for *'We may be soon washed, but to be healed is the work of a long cure.'*

During this Epiphany Season, Bishop Steven is inviting us to come together and focus our attention on 'Come and see' from John's Gospel chapter 1 v

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39. The invitation is for those outside the Church - and those within already - to use this time to renew our faith. I hope we can find ways to invite new people, and ourselves, to re-orientate ourselves as we rediscover ourselves as beloved of God. I look forward to exploring this with you in the weeks to come.

As we do this, our Baptism, and the renewal of grace in the Eucharist, will be central to our nurturing of the Faith. The act of Benediction in our services is a place of profound encounter with the God of Light. Here we are challenged to become more porous for the Mystery to enter and change us, as the confessional belief of our baptism becomes more real. That belief is in a God who is creator, historical saviour and the inner power of authentic human life that leads to final salvation. For each one of us is invited into a relationship with the God of Genesis, Miriam & Moses, Elijah and Elisha and of Mary where, coming through the waters of fear and chaos, and one with Jesus, baptised by the Holy Spirit, we find ourselves acclaimed, 'You are my beloved.'

Amen.