

Sunday 13th January, 2019
The Baptism of our Lord - Year C

Isaiah 43:1-7

Psalm 29

Acts 8:14-17

Luke 3:15-22

In the name of the Trinity; Creator, Redeemer, and Life-Giver...

As we observe Jesus' baptism this Sunday, the lectionary texts celebrate our being welcomed into and made permanent members of God's family through our baptisms.

In the Scriptures Baptism is the sign of entrance into the Christian life -- a reminder of our redemption and a sign of God's love. Each of this week's lectionary texts gives us the opportunity to reflect on the joy of our baptism and to celebrate God's covenantal promises. It is a time of hearing God's joyous acclamation of Jesus as the beloved: "You are my son!" The scriptures also recall our belonging to God -- celebrating our adoption, as it were. It is as if the triune God would say to us, "You are part of us now."

The voice that claims Jesus as God's own in Luke finds a parallel in Isaiah's hopeful remembrance of God's promise of redemption. Those who fear being lost in the overwhelming flood or drowned by rushing river waters are assured of God's nearness and redemption in Isaiah. It is a claim similar to the announcement by God that Jesus is the beloved.

For Isaiah, as in baptism, the promised action of God is one of redemption. God's people are claimed as God's own; they are cherished and beloved, even as they are tested. Isaiah's sings of God's redemption with exuberance. The prophet is confident of the work God has begun -- and emphatically assures God's people that "You are mine."

The Jewish practice of baptism, mainly used for Gentile converts to Judaism, (until later adapted by John the Baptist), was primarily a rite of cleansing... a washing-away of the stains of a former (Gentile) life. This 'quiet' water, accessed in a river or a 'bath', was a symbol and gift of refreshment and renewal.

But the Greek word, 'baptizeo', has a dual meaning - both to dip in water AND to cause death by drowning! In baptism, therefore, the candidate was not only cleansed but also overwhelmed by the water of God, and thus as a consequence of 'drowning' was brought forth as a new person.

As with so many of our rituals, Christianity took the Jewish practice and recast it in the light of the experience of Christ. Baptism became for us the ritual of dying to an old world, in order that we might be resurrected with Christ to a new life. This is the heart of Christian baptism.

Thus still, in some Third World churches, the symbolism is very stark. The baby is brought into the church in a mock-coffin, to strains of mourning and grief from the congregation... then stripped naked... fully immersed in the font or bath... completely under the water... and brought (usually screaming) to the surface... to shouts of joy and triumph... and then dressed in new white clothes and the celebration begins. It's death and resurrection... a reasonable rendering of the priest's baptismal prayer could be, "I drown you in the name of Father, Son and Holy Spirit... and resurrect you to new life in the name of Christ."

We in the west are more cautious with our symbolism. Indeed a casual observer might see us doing little more than refreshing the baby's brow. But the symbolism of our baptism is the same. We wash away an old way of seeing and living... and this is intended to be so radical, it is as if the baptised person is drowned to an old life and brought forth to a totally new way of being.

Most of us find that sort of symbolism and theology challenging... disturbing even. It is symptomatic of our church practice that we prefer to pacify, to down-play the raw power... the overwhelming majesty... of God.

We are more likely to speak of God as a calming, refreshing stream, than as the ocean - that vast, deep water that we can never tame ... that ceaseless force that sweeps aside all defences... that unfathomable depth in which even the strongest, most independent people drown.

Our culture is obsessed with the illusion of personal control and potency. So it's no surprise that within the church, we too find it hard to let go. We dabble with God on our own terms - occasionally paddling in the shallows, with a solid shore and beach towel close at hand. It's an unchallenged truism even amongst committed church members... that you don't want to let this faith business get out of hand!

So much of what we do in church activity and theology... even prayer... is more about our desire to tame or organise God, than plunging into the depths of faith. However, the tradition always speaks of faith as a matter of surrendering to God. The ancient rite of baptism speaks of drowning in God. And Christ Jesus himself used one consistent metaphor - only the person prepared to die to the old, could ever be born again to the new.

We dabble... when we need to drown. We build dams... where we need to give ourselves over to the power of the flood. For all our talking and all our rushing around, only one thing is necessary - that we surrender to the irresistible surge and flow of God.

Today we celebrate the Baptism of Our Lord and tell the story of Christ's encounter with the Baptist at the Jordan. The early church believed that this was the moment where his status as God's Beloved was revealed... and the full power of God's Spirit was unleashed in him.

This was the moment... when Jesus of Nazareth goes under the water as the carpenter's son from Galilee... and emerges knowing that he is the Christ.

The gospel story is telling us, that Jesus did not merely paddle in the shallows, but gave himself over, without reservation, to God.

Jesus did not play it safe but instead surrendered to the deep waters of God... he gave himself over to drowning in God's power and grace. And through this self-offering - repeated throughout his life to the final moment of the cross - the spirit of God was released within him... to over-fill him and flood into the whole world.

This is the path we are called to follow - the ritual of baptism is to be the sign of our life's journey. The call is to leave our dry land of illusory independence and control, and allow ourselves to be carried deep into God. To feel our feet slip as we are drawn beyond our depth... to drown in love... in order that we may be genuinely saved.

Amen.