



Baptism of our Lord

9th January 2011

Isaiah 42: 1-9, Psalm 29, Acts 10: 34-43, Matthew 3: 13-17

In the name of God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, Amen

In today's readings we encounter another birth narrative, we hear another story of birth as Christmas continues to echo in our lives. It's another revelation of the quest for realization! Today we symbolically move from the manger to the Font, or rather we *are invited* to move from the manger to the Font. At Christmas we reflected on the nativity, and if we picture that scene, it's a scene that we're so familiar with from being printed over and over a gain on Christmas cards, once again we find a child at its centre. Today's birth narrative takes us into a very different scene, into the drama of two adults standing in the waters of the river Jordan. Today we witness, we celebrate and we engage, the baptism of Jesus by John.

As an interesting aside, it is worth looking at the development within our own tradition, within the Anglican church, that has refocused this scene and has once again put a child, or children, into the centre of the action. It's a refocusing that can be helpful, in that it underscores baptism as a 'birth narrative'. However, it's also perhaps unhelpful in that we can miss the movement, the invitation that draws us from the manger to the Font. And if we're left in the manger, we might never truly experience our entering the Church.

When we look back to the Christmas story do we realize that what was revealed was much more than the birth of a child? Again, as we revisit the narrative of Christmas, we find that the fullness of revelation is made manifest in the responses to the child. Angels, Mary, Joseph, shepherds and the three wise travellers all bring to life what Christmas reveals. And in their response we can begin to appreciate something about who *we* are and how we might see ourselves called to live out the fullness of our birth.

So, let's look again at today's readings and see who brings us the opportunity for revelation; who gives us an opportunity for realization – to make real what has been revealed? We hear from Isaiah, the prophet of vision; we hear from the psalmist - a beautiful psalm that seems to echo for us the very song of life's spirit. We also hear from Peter, giving us a perspective from a disciple and a witness; we hear from John. John is the prophet of realization, for as Isaiah speaks of what is beyond, John grasps that same image or prophesy and grounds in the touch and feel of baptism – the creative movement; he brings all that Isaiah seeks and brings it into the present. And we hear from Jesus – the incarnation of Love.

So the readings speak to us with different voices, for they call to different peoples and from different peoples in different ages, and so today they might speak to different parts of us. One might hear one of the readings, one of the lines in one of the readings, and someone else might hear something quite different, mystically drawing into

oneness those parts of us that hear. The same might go on within each and every individual, the readings call and speak to different parts of us, drawing us into the integrity of being whole and full in ourselves,

Take the readings together and it's really interesting. The first reading begins with: *'Here is my servant, whom I uphold, my chosen, in whom my soul delights.'* And the last reading ends with: *"This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased."*

Those writings are separated in time by around 750 years and yet we find those texts are book-ended with the very same voice. And they pose the questions: who is the "my servant" whom I uphold; who is the "my beloved" with whom I am well pleased? We might push it further and ask once again, who is the Messiah?

In Isaiah's time the Hebrew tradition looked ahead for a Messiah. Very easy to picture: they saw themselves as God's chosen, they were in a covenant relationship with God which they understood and sought to live out, and yet the ebb and flow of the every day, the invasion of different armies, the ups and downs of life, somehow made that movement as God's chosen a little tenuous, so they looked ahead to a Messiah – 'regardless of what happens, one day someone will come and fix the whole lot'.

Later, much later, after the 'first Christmas' – rather the first Easter, some from that same tradition argued that Jesus had fulfilled the role that was being sought, that he was in fact, the Messiah. Some stayed within the old tradition and said, 'No, he's not.' Others embraced the new paradigm, the new understanding, and moved in another direction. I wonder if that is the very dynamic of life, because it's certainly a dynamic of our own everyday experience. We're constantly being asked to leave one thing and embrace another and we're constantly making choices of rejecting something that may take us beyond where we are because we want to hang on to what we've got. And it gets worse as you get older. People cannot keep up with the technology of mobile phones and that's what this is all about – it's the same movement, it's the same energy, only this is speaking of something much more important than a mobile phone. It's speaking of your fullness of being, the realisation of your birth, the realisation of life lived to the glory of God.

At the end of the day, and likely before the end of the sermon, many will begin to entertain the thought 'who cares anyway'? However, before writing off the questions - 'who is my servant', who is that "my servant" that's spoken of, who is the my beloved, who is the Messiah – before we write them off, we might take time to ponder that question, who is the Messiah of my own expectations and who is the Jesus of my realizations? Come up with your own answer, don't look in the book, find an answer within.

Those who stayed with the old tradition and those who moved on: at the end of the day it's likely that both had a sense of rightness in what they did. They glimpsed a part of the truth. Jesus IS a revelation/realisation of Isaiah's prophesy, and yet at the same time not the longed-for Messiah. He fulfils even more than what was expected of the Messiah, and yet comes in the guise of "Son of God". What does it mean for us, what does it mean for me, what does it mean for you, who these people are, who these questions relate to?

In the second reading, Peter speaks in stunningly un-Australian terms; he speaks of "no partiality" – obviously unaware of boat-people. And he goes on to say "anyone who fears God... is acceptable", obviously he has not heard of Muslims! Next he gives us a Reader's Digest condensed version of the biography of Jesus; he was anointed, baptized; he did good; God was with him; "they" killed him; God raised him and finally, all who believe him receive forgiveness.

The readings and *our* baptism ask us and ask of us life-giving questions. Who is God's servant, who is God's chosen; who are those in whom God delights? Who is God's child – God's daughter and God's son? Who is Jesus? They're not questions for theological research; they draw us into asking 'Who am I?' and 'Who are you?' Who am I and who are those around me? Who am I in my birth, and who are you in your birth? Who am I in my baptism, and who are you in your baptism? Who are you and who are we in our fullness of life?

I sometimes think that we don't engage those questions because we feel uncomfortable, as if when we start to ask those questions, who am I, we fall into a smallness of self. We start accounting for where we have failed, what we've missed, what we've got wrong, what we've denied, what we've avoided. And as those lists start to mount up we just move away from the question, 'Who am I in my birth, in my baptism, in my fullness of life?' We move away, we switch on the television or we pick up a catalogue or we go shopping. We just can't stay there. Peter offers us a little key: "*Everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness.*" There's a clean sheet inside each and everyone. It's the flame that we lit, it's the water that we bathe in the Font. None of that matters, none of it need stop you from the realisation of your birth.

Peter knows a life-giving truth: belief is generative of forgiveness. And so it's a starting point to encounter our integrity, which is a starting point to encountering our oneness, and so too our fullness. We can open the manger of our own nativity, we can move to the Font and claim our own baptism and we can open ourselves to the reality that Jesus is not "Other". For not one is God's delight unless and until we all are one:

*no partiality
every nation
Lord of all
everyone who believes... receives*

Today we are invited into the post-Christmas movement; it will lead, I think, into a post-Christian, a movement from the Manger to the Font, a movement into the waters of the Jordan, and into the chaos that leads us to, and separates us from, living in the land of promise.

We will need to rework much of what we hold onto. We will even need to reword the simplest of carols:

*Throw away now the manger
seek the font for your head
and become just like Jesus
awakening the dead.....*

The Lord be with you
Peter Humphris