



The Baptism of our Lord

13th January 2013

Isaiah 43: 1-7, Psalm 29, Acts 8: 14-17, Luke 3:15-22

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

Last week as we celebrated the feast of Epiphany we explored the readings of the day and sought the essence, the wisdom of the scriptures that goes beyond the narrative of the event itself. Today we have an opportunity to explore baptism, and once again to look beyond the event of the gospel narrative and seek the very essence and wisdom associated with Baptism, both the baptism of our Lord and our own baptism.

Coming closely in the wake of Epiphany, it is interesting to see that in many ways the Church's institution of baptism, the ritual activity of baptism, parallels that of the Epiphany narrative. The showing to the world of the baby in the manger is ritualised and paralleled by the baby in the font being shown to the congregation.

The symbolic significance of the water brings to the font much more than the waters of the Jordan in which the narrative of Jesus' baptism is given context. We can begin to appreciate the depth, of the water, as we look at today's first reading. Although pre-dating the Baptism of Jesus by over 500 years; Isaiah could well be providing a poetic understanding of that very same event. Isaiah proclaims; "*When you pass through the waters, I will be with you.*" And the prayer book states that; "In baptism, the promises of God are visibly signed and sealed for us. We are joined to Christ, and made members of his body, the Church universal." Isaiah proclaims; "*I have called you by name, you are mine.*" And the prayer book states after the baptised is named, "I sign you with the sign of the cross to show that you are marked as Christ's own for ever."

Isaiah is not talking about baptism, but the essence of baptism is very much alive in his understanding. There is, in his voice, an appreciation of the Divine mystery that is spoken of in terms that are unbounded by the confines of orthodoxy. Therefore, Isaiah provides us with a delightful starting point as we come to contemplate the baptism of the gospel narrative and consider our own baptism.

In verses 5,6 and 7, the universal, inclusive scope of Isaiah's insight is identified, and so he speaks with an orientation to the whole of humanity. His appreciation of humanity is very much voiced in the first verse; "*But now thus says the LORD, he who created you, O Jacob, he who formed you, O Israel: Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are mine.*" The immediate and intimate relationship of God and Humanity is given voice, and in Isaiah's eyes all are seen as Divinely created, Divinely formed, and redeemed into a oneness with the Divine.

Isaiah's appreciation of God, his giving voice to the Divine Word does create some questions for the more orthodox Christian understanding. He speaks of a Divine redemption that is a given and not consequential to the Easter event of Jesus. And when Isaiah knows of a God who "*will be with you*", he speaks of Emmanuel (God with us) before the Christmas nativity of Jesus. And in complete accord with our Epiphany understanding, Isaiah also declares the divine activity in verses 3 and 4 as the activity of giving.

Isaiah's theology invites us to look deeper into the waters of Baptism, and the process of baptism, and we can start looking by observing the practises of baptism of the early church as described in the second reading from Acts. And from that reading it can appear that the Divine gift, the Holy Spirit is very much vested in

the hands of “Peter and John”. [I wonder if that’s the same here at St Paul’s!] Already the Church has adopted the rite of Baptism, the process of baptism, in order to provide a mechanism for gate-keeping. As the Church grew in numbers and in power the role of baptism as gate-keeper and passport control for the ‘in-crowd’ somehow distorted the very essence of our faith orientation from an inclusive, giving and out reaching movement to an inwardly focussed exclusive movement that saw the unbaptised as the great unwashed.

So let’s go to the gospel and see what we learn from the account of baptism we have in Luke’s writing. Luke is concerned to provide differentiation between Jesus and John the Baptist; both were prophetic voices, both called from the wilderness and sought to open the hearts of people to a new world view, a new enlightenment. So Luke provides an honouring of John and an underlining or pointing toward the messianic nature of Jesus...

That Jesus is baptised by John is both an affirmation of John’s activity and at the same time it identifies for us a place for, and role for, baptism that is quite different to the role subsequently adopted by the Church. In this gospel narrative of baptism there is an important manifestation of the Divine Word;

“the heaven was opened, 22 and the Holy Spirit descended upon him in bodily form like a dove. And a voice came from heaven, “You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.””

In hearing this we already know from Isaiah’s insight that what is being voiced is already a given; *“you are precious in my sight, and honoured, and I love you”*

So perhaps in baptism we seek, and find, a reminder of our truest creation. Perhaps baptism is not the activity of differentiation, between John and Jesus, or between washed and un-washed, it is not the passport control office for Church membership, it is much more. Baptism offers a simple and ancient ritual that symbolically brings to life the unseen truth of our truest being, and so recalls us into an integrity of being with that truth: *“you are precious in my sight, and honoured, and I love you”*. *“You are my child[Son], my[the] Beloved; with you I am well pleased.”* These “Divine words” utter us into life truth, and we are spoken into that truth alongside every other. For they are uttered; *“when all the people were baptised, and when Jesus also had been baptised”*

In baptism we draw life out of the waters of chaos, an activity that echoes the very activity of Divine creation. The action of baptism that takes us through the water, recalls the Exodus journey that parted the seas opening a path into freedom and the crossing of the river Jordan our entry into the land of promise, and a crossing of the same waters that are the place of Jesus’ baptism. In baptism we are named, or rather our name is given voice; and that too is but an echo of our Divine name; *“You are my child[Son], my[the] Beloved; with you I am well pleased.”*

The gospel narratives are often misunderstood, they are often seen as stories about Jesus, but Jesus seeks to reveal our truth, and so these narratives offer us a reading of our story. When the prayer book advises us that, “In baptism, the promises of God are visibly signed and sealed for us. We are joined to Christ, and made members of his body, the Church universal”, we are not being offered a stamped passport, we are not being changed; rather we have an opportunity for Epiphany, for revelation and making manifest, we are recalled through the font to the manger of our Divine birth. We are given a light, that illuminates the unseen, we are drawn from the chaos and the obvious toward our truest name, our deepest being

Last week, we finished with a simple thought, following the twelve days of Christmas, and on the feast of the Epiphany we were left with the advice: don’t abandon the baby. This week, the baptism of our lord, we might be reminded not to throw the bathwater out with the Baby, or we might heed the advice of summer, and be water wise, and seek our truth in the water of our baptism.

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