

12 January 2014 Baptism of our Lord

Isaiah 42: 1-9

Psalm 29

Acts 10: 34-43

Matthew 3:13-17

These sermon notes were prepared before the sermon was delivered and so do not transcribe the actual sermon word for word

If we appreciate Advent as a season of journeying - a journey of following the light, that which is illuminated by the heavenly star; then Christmas is more a threshold encounter, for we stand at the nativity, on the threshold; we stand on the threshold at the womb of creation and at the manger of humanity.

Christians are often seen, and see themselves, as followers of Christ, which parallels the orientation of Advent; what changes when we encounter the reality of the nativity; no longer an Advent people, no longer followers, but a people enfleshed and birthed in 'Christ'..

We are again at that threshold of encounter today when we hear the gospel account of the baptism of Jesus by John; another symbolic birth, and so again we stand at the threshold of the nativity: *"the former things have come to pass, and new things I now declare."*

Today, in the liturgical calendar, we celebrate, and recognise the beginning of Jesus' ministry; and baptism remains a symbolic beginning for all of us and for our life as the church.

The gospel of Mark actually begins with this same narrative, Mark did not need to create a story about the birth of Jesus, rather he saw that it was his life and his work that spoke for themselves of his being.

Matthew once again echoes the prophesy of Isaiah in his narrative of baptism. Just like we found in his nativity scene, we are given a picture, an icon, that reveals the divine purpose of life and the divine presence in life.

Isaiah was not writing about Christ, rather he is giving us a prophetic insight into life's purpose when lived in accord with Divine purpose; it is therefore good to hold open the question; who is the servant, the one hoped for that is the expectation within Isaiah's prophesy?

The echoes, or parallels, between the gospel narrative and Isaiah's prophesy are readily heard:

"Here is my servant, whom I uphold, my chosen, in whom my soul delights"

"This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased."

"I have put my spirit upon him"

"the Spirit of God descending like a dove and alighting on him."

And the subtle difference in these echoes is equally important to consider; Where Isaiah speaks of "*servant*", Matthew speaks of "*son*".

We can appreciate a shift here from an institutional and hierarchical appreciation of God, to an intimate and relational understanding of God.

Throughout his teaching, when Jesus refers to God as ‘*abba*’, father, he is revealing clear theological perspective rather than a supernatural phenomenon

.The voice, the echo of Isaiah at the baptism of Jesus could have more obviously stated: “This is my beloved servant, with whom I am well pleased.”

However, Matthew had encountered Jesus, his being, his life, his work and his teaching all spoke of a much closer relationship with God than that of ‘servant’. Matthew encountered someone empowered by love, someone free to forgive, and he encountered ‘an inheritor of the Kingdom of heaven’, he encountered a ‘son’ and not a ‘servant’.

And is not that the very revelation that Christ himself made manifest for all?

If we read these scriptures without the distortion of the primitive church, we can see that Isaiah’s advent expectation is birthed, or brought into reality through the iconic Nativity of Christ.

Isaiah spoke of a servant, the very delight of God: bringing justice through non-violence; “*a light to the nations, to open the eyes that are blind, to bring out the prisoners from the dungeon, from the prison those who sit in darkness.*”

And he speaks of a God who ‘gives’ to all the people of the earth: “*who gives breath to the people upon it and spirit to those who walk in it.*”

Matthew saw in the person of Jesus that Isaiah’s Advent was brought to birth, and more; the shift from ‘servant’ to ‘son’ brought an understanding of God from ‘far away’, down to earth.

Psalms 29 we read today speaks of an almighty God and the attributes are very much from the perspective of an institutional servant, for from such a lowly position God would be: king, enthroned, mighty and powerful, a God whose glory thunders. Matthew finds a different perspective revealed through Christ, and likewise Peter, in his sermon that we read in the second reading from Acts sees a universal God: “*I truly understand that God shows no partiality, 35 but in every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him.*” And he sees in Jesus that “*God was with him.*”

What is revealed in the Nativity, is today revealed again in the person and ministry of the Jesus that Matthew and Peter encountered.

They did not see a supernatural Son of God, rather they found the Advent of Isaiah enfleshed for all people.

The servant of Isaiah is you and me.

The baptism of Jesus reveals the birth inherent in the whole of humanity.

What we might now consider is where to from here... will we cross the threshold of revelation and bring to birth a New, and divine creation.

Now is the time for us to fulfil the expectation of Advent, and I came across an example of how there is a tendency for things to remain unchanged when we fail to embrace the prophetic vision of tomorrow and fail to participate in a new creation....

A little over a century ago, our first prime minister[Barton] told our first parliament that “the doctrine of the equality of man was never intended to apply to the equality of the Englishman and the Chinaman”.

“I do not think either that the doctrine of the equality of man was really ever intended to include racial equality. There is no racial equality. There is that basic inequality. These races are, in comparison with white races - I think no one wants convincing of this fact - unequal and inferior. The doctrine of the equality of man was never intended to apply to the equality of the Englishman and the Chinaman. There is a deep-set difference, and we see no prospect and no promise of its ever being effaced. Nothing in this world can put these two races upon an equality. Nothing we can do by cultivation, by refinement, or by anything else will make some races equal to others.” [Immigration restriction bill - Hansard]

Isaiah looks to us saying “here is my servant”

Christ reveals us, and all, as beloved

So as we cross the threshold we should be prepared to be

a light to the nations,

to open the eyes that are blind,

to bring out the prisoners from the dungeon, from the prison those who sit in darkness.