

Collect, Readings and Sermon for Sunday 9th January 2022
The Baptism of Christ

Collect

Heavenly Father,
at the Jordan you revealed Jesus as your Son:
may we recognize him as our Lord
and know ourselves to be your beloved children;
through Jesus Christ our Saviour.

Amen.

Isaiah 43:1-7

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.
When you pass through the waters, I will be with you;
 and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you;
when you walk through fire you shall not be burned,
 and the flame shall not consume you.
For I am the Lord your God,
 the Holy One of Israel, your Saviour.
I give Egypt as your ransom,
 Ethiopia and Seba in exchange for you.
Because you are precious in my sight,
 and honoured, and I love you,
I give people in return for you,
 nations in exchange for your life.
Do not fear, for I am with you;
 I will bring your offspring from the east,
 and from the west I will gather you;
I will say to the north, 'Give them up',
 and to the south, 'Do not withhold;
bring my sons from far away
 and my daughters from the end of the earth—
everyone who is called by my name,
 whom I created for my glory,
 whom I formed and made.'

Luke 3:15-17, 21-22

As the people were filled with expectation, and all were questioning in their hearts concerning John, whether he might be the Messiah, John answered all of them by saying, 'I baptize you with water; but one who is more powerful than I is coming; I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandals. He

will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. His winnowing-fork is in his hand, to clear his threshing-floor and to gather the wheat into his granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire.'

Now when all the people were baptized, and when Jesus also had been baptized and was praying, the heaven was opened, 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.'

Sermon

One of the great joys of the last year has been the steady stream of baptisms, as families have brought children, many of whom were born early in lockdown, here to St. Mary's to mark the beginning of their Christian journey. Having endured a year that included church closure and no baptisms, their return has been particularly special. There is something wonderful about the fact that people still want to acknowledge the importance of God in shaping their lives.

The baptism service is a rich source of imagery, and part of the reason that the Church marks the Baptism of Christ each year is to reconnect us all with our own baptism. To remind us of its meaning in our own lives. To connect us once again with that journey which began with our baptism.

When I go into schools to talk about baptism, and the significance of each of the symbols, the children come up with far better answers than I can think of. The water of baptism is in part about cleansing. It's not that those coming for baptism are especially in need of that, but rather a reminder that throughout our lives, it makes a difference if we are prepared to acknowledge where things have gone wrong; say sorry; and receive forgiveness. Water is also a primary source of life – we simply can't survive without it. Baptism is all about life: a new life in Christ; and the fulness of life to which God calls us. As the second-century church father Irenaeus put it: "the glory of God is a human being fully alive."

There are other symbols of baptism, too. Anointing with oil, a sign of being connected with the divine. And the lighted candle which is given to each person who is baptised, lit from the Paschal candle, the symbol of new life in Christ. The candle is a reminder of the light of Christ shining in our lives, which can never be put out, and which helps us to find the way to follow in Christ's footsteps.

The symbols of baptism help us to see the deeper meaning of baptism. That it is all about our identity – as children of God who find our direction from Christ. And part of our identity comes from belonging. From being part of the wider Christian community. It is so easy to remind people of this when children are baptised, because we all know how much parents rely on the support of friends and family in bringing up their children.

But in reality, none of us can be fully ourselves unless we are part of a community. Other people shape us and help us to understand more about ourselves – just as we help them to understand more about themselves. Often others can see in us what we are unable to see in ourselves – can point out our gifts which we hadn't really appreciated.

Following the announcement of Desmond Tutu's death just after Christmas, there was a particular quote from Rowan Williams, doing the rounds on Social Media, which comes from his book, "Being Disciples":

"I have a theory, which I started elaborating after I had met Archbishop Desmond Tutu a few times, that there are two kinds of egotists in this world. There are egotists that are so in love with themselves that they have no room for anybody else, and there are egotists that are so in love with themselves that they make it possible for everybody else to be in love with themselves. They are at home in their skins. It doesn't mean that they are arrogant or self-obsessed or think they are faultless. They have learned to sense some of the joy that God takes in them. And in that sense Desmond Tutu manifestly loves being Desmond Tutu; there's no doubt about that. But the effect of

that is not to make me feel frozen or shrunk; it makes me feel that just possibly, by God's infinite grace, I could one day love being Rowan Williams in the way that Desmond loves being Desmond Tutu."

It strikes me that this observation demonstrates the genuine connection between identity and belonging. As Rowan Williams points out, there was something about Desmond Tutu's ease with himself that enabled others to be more at ease with themselves, too.

It's perhaps worth noting that as a South African, Desmond Tutu was intimately acquainted with the idea of *Ubuntu*. This philosophy is sometimes translated as: "I am because we are." It is all about the connectedness of the whole of humanity. Contrary to the individualism that can tend to pervade parts of western society, ubuntu recognises a universal bond of sharing that connects all humanity. In Christian terms, it suggests that we are all brothers and sisters through God's presence within us all. So in order for us as individuals to become fully what God intends, we must be reconciled with others. Our own humanity – and therefore identity – is intimately bound up with others.

There is something for me about the quote from Rowan Williams that seems to encapsulate so much that we celebrate with the Baptism of Christ. Two phrases stand out especially. The idea of being at home in our own skin; and learning to sense some of the joy that God takes in us. Of course we are all works in progress – and that is what baptism is about, too – an acknowledgement that we are all on a lifelong journey. Some days we can all feel down on ourselves and tend more towards being self deprecating than feeling at home in our own skin. I wonder how often you dare to believe that God really does take joy in you. Just as you are.

Really, that is why we celebrate the Baptism of Christ. It is a reminder that the words Jesus hears at his baptism are words for each one of us, too. "You are my child, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased." Try it out for yourself. You - you Jenny, you Judith, you Martin – are my child, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased. Dare to hear it. And it might just change our lives.

Amen