

ST STEPHEN'S HOME SERVICE

SUNDAY 9th January 2021

THE BAPTISM OF CHRIST

INTRODUCTION

This Sunday, the Church celebrates the Baptism of Christ. Before Jesus embarks on his public ministry, he receives a very powerful affirmation of God's love for him: "You are my dearly-loved child: I am delighted with you." That affirmation must have given Jesus so much strength to face the difficult times which lay ahead.

As baptised people, our calling is first and foremost to hear God affirming of us: "You are my dearly-loved child: I am delighted with you." In the certainty of that love for you and for me, we find strength to face life's trials. As Isaiah so powerfully puts it: "When you pass through the waters, I will be with you... when you walk through fire the flame shall not consume you."

Take a moment now to put aside everything else on your mind, and allow yourself to receive those words spoken to you personally: "You [your name here] are my dearly-loved child: I am delighted with you."

CALL TO WORSHIP

O worship the Lord in the beauty of holiness;
Bow down before him, his glory proclaim;
With gold of obedience, and incense of lowliness,
Kneel and adore him: the Lord is his name.

Low at his feet lay thy burden of carefulness:
High on his heart he will bear it for thee,
Comfort thy sorrows, and answer thy prayerfulness,
Guiding thy steps as may best for thee be.

Fear not to enter his courts in the slenderness
Of the poor wealth thou wouldst reckon as thine:
Truth in its beauty, and love in its tenderness,
These are the offerings to lay on his shrine.

These, though we bring them in trembling and fearfulness,
He will accept for the name that is dear;
Mornings of joy give for evenings of tearfulness,
Trust for our trembling and hope for our fear.

O worship the Lord in the beauty of holiness;
Bow down before him, his glory proclaim;
With gold of obedience, and incense of lowliness,
Kneel and adore him: the Lord is his name.

Recognising God's presence with us

In the beginning
before time, before people,
before the world began,
God was.

Here and now
among us, beside us,
enlisting the people of the earth
for the purposes of heaven,
God is.

In the future,
when we have turned to dust
and all we know has found its fulfilment,
God will be.

Not denying the world, but delighting in it,
not condemning the world, but redeeming it,
through Jesus Christ,
by the power of the Holy Spirit,
God was,
God is,
God will be.

A SONG IN PRAISE OF GOD'S POWER

Praise the LORD, you heavenly beings;
praise his glory and power.

Praise the LORD's glorious name;
bow down before the Holy One when he appears.

The voice of the LORD is heard on the seas;
the glorious God thunders,
and his voice echoes over the ocean.

The voice of the LORD is heard
in all its might and majesty.

The voice of the LORD breaks the cedars,
even the cedars of Lebanon.

He makes the mountains of Lebanon jump like calves
and makes Mount Hermon leap like a young bull.

The voice of the LORD makes the lightning flash.
His voice makes the desert shake;
he shakes the desert of Kadesh.

The LORD's voice shakes the oaks
and strips the leaves from the trees
while everyone in his Temple shouts, "Glory to God!"

The LORD rules over the deep waters;
he rules as king forever.

The LORD gives strength to his people
and blesses them with peace.

Psalm 29
*(Good News
Translation)*

RECEIVING GOD'S ACCEPTANCE

Because God was merciful,
he saved us through the water of rebirth
and the renewing power of the Holy Spirit.
But through sin we have fallen away from our baptism.
Let us return to the Lord and renew our faith in his promises
by confessing our sins in penitence.

God be gracious to us and bless us,
And make your face shine upon us:
Lord, have mercy.

Lord, have mercy.

May your ways be known on the earth,
Your saving power among the nations:
Christ, have mercy.

Christ, have mercy.

You Lord, have made known your salvation,
And reveal your justice in the sight of the nations:
Lord, have mercy.

Lord, have mercy.

May the God of all healing and forgiveness
draw us to himself
and cleanse us from all our sins,
that we may behold the glory of his Son,
the Word made flesh,
Jesus Christ our Lord.

Amen.

OLD TESTAMENT READING - 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."
Thanks be to God.

GOSPEL READING

Luke 3:15-17,21-22

Hear the Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ according to Luke.

Glory to you, O Lord.

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."

This is the Gospel of the Lord.

Praise to you, O Christ.

REFLECTION (by Lindsey Coulthard)

As you read this in cold January I encourage you to imagine yourself in a warm infinity pool. The location can be your choice but the air is still, the sky is blue, and the water is crystal clear. There is no end and no beginning to it. The temperature is just perfect; it's not too hot and it's not too

cold. Just perfect body temperature which moves in time with you. In fact as you gently move your hands through the water – you'd hardly know you were immersed – you barely notice it's there.

On a trip to Salisbury Cathedral last year I was reminded of the infinity of God's love for us as I gazed at the breath-taking font which is situated at the North Porch Crossing. If you're able to travel I can thoroughly recommend it, even if only to view the font alone which is absolutely stunning. It may not be to everyone's taste being rather contemporary in design but I defy anyone to visit and not experience at least a tiny bit of the 'wow' factor. The brief after all, was to produce both a working font and a tourist attraction.

Designed and constructed by artist William Pye, the predominant feature of the font is water; its mirror-like surface reflects a lot of the surrounding architecture. Four smooth filaments of water pass through spouts at each of the four corners and disappear through a bronze grating set into the floor which creates an 'infinity' feature.

The whole font is shaped like a cross which was created from a square by scooping out curved sections on each of the four sides. This immediately accentuates the direction of the flow of water, channelling it towards the corners which, at the same

time provide a natural position for the priest and candidate to stand for baptism.

The pièce de résistance for me though are the words that can be found all along the edges of the font:

*'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.'*

I can imagine priests leaning into the curved apertures on the side of the font cradling a child over the water or perhaps leaning over with adult candidate baptising them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit with those words of great comfort almost pressed into them; *'I have called you by name, you are mine.'*

Baptism though does not mean that we are offered immunity from difficulty or disease. It can't take away our troubles, or prevent us from pain, or change the circumstances of our lives. But it can change us, by offering a way through our difficulties, by enabling us to live with the circumstances we find ourselves in and ultimately, by offering a way through death. In baptism we are offered a new way of being. We are invited into a deeper relationship with God who calls each of us through those words from Isaiah and says, *'Do not fear, for I have redeemed you.....you are mine.'*

When we pass through difficult waters – and for many of us – it may feel as though we're still in difficult waters, we can know that God is with us. To know this and to trust in this, I mean *really* trust this, is the gift of baptism.

Baptism always happens at the border. The border of what I hear you asking. It may sound a bit strange but baptism always takes place at the border of life as it is and life as it might be. The border between darkness and light, the border between a life merely surviving or a life properly thriving, the border between life and death. Some of us might feel as though we are standing on that border at the moment. For some of us it might be a place of fear or anxiety, for others it might be a place of hope or healing. In reality it is both at the same time.

The only reason we can stand at this border is because Jesus stood there first. We stand on the very same border that Jesus stood on when he was baptised and he now stands alongside us there. Emmanuel – God with us. Picture the moment of Jesus' baptism. I imagine him going down into the water and emerging again. And then we're told by St. Luke,

'the heaven opened, and the Holy Spirit descended on 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." '

Jesus' baptism is for our sake and for our salvation. Jesus' baptism makes our baptism possible. And the water that once drowned is now sanctified (made holy) water. It is water that gives us life. There is nothing to fear.

Of course, we can only ever be baptised once – ritually, that is. But throughout the course of our lives we return again and again to the waters of baptism. Daily in fact - through living out our baptismal vows, though we may not always be conscious of this. And we'll be reminded of them and recommit to them again in the words of the creed later in the service.

During the introduction to our baptisms here at St. Stephens we talk about the vivid symbols that are used during the service. When we talk about the water – it is often referred to as God's love being poured on to the little (or not so little) person being baptised. That's a fabulous image isn't it? God's love being poured out in the holy water of baptism and onto the candidates head. Imagine that for yourself with those words – *'You are my son, you are my daughter, I love you and I am well pleased with you.'*

So let's return to place I started from – a warm infinity pool and that beautiful font in Salisbury Cathedral with the infinity water feature as images of the warmth and absolute constancy of God's love for you and for me. And those words of comfort and reassurance:

*'Do not fear, for I have redeemed you;
I have called you by name, you are mine,
you are my son, you are my daughter,
you are so loved; with you I am well pleased.'*

RESPONDING TO THE WORD

In response to what we have heard, let us affirm our trust and faith in God:

Do you believe and trust in God the Father,
source of all being and life,
the one for whom we exist?

We believe and trust in him.

Do you believe and trust in God the Son,
who took our human nature,
died for us and rose again?

We believe and trust in him.

Do you believe and trust in God the Holy Spirit,
who gives life to the people of God

and makes Christ known in the world?
We believe and trust in him.

This is the faith of the Church.

This is our faith.

**We believe and trust in one God,
Father, Son and Holy Spirit.
Amen.**

PRAYERS

Let the Spirit of God in our hearts plead
for the church and for the world.

Great God of time and space,
fill the church with such joy in believing
that all Christians overflow with love,
compassion, generosity and humility.
Let us walk your way and live your life.
Silence

May the Spirit of God:

Fill us to overflowing.

Great God of power and justice,
fill the arenas of leadership and conflict
with sharpened consciences and with courage,
so that wise decisions are made,
needs are met, and wrongs are righted.

Silence

May the Spirit of God:
Fill us to overflowing.

Great God of gentleness and truth,
fill every home with new insight
and greater understanding.
Break down the divisive barriers
and build up our capacity to love.

Silence

May the Spirit of God:
Fill us to overflowing.

Great God of attentive caring,
fill us with your practical compassion;
may all who suffer be heard,
comforted and cared for.
Heal both their situation and our hardness of heart.
We pray for all who are sick in body, mind or spirit, holding
before you: Dot Lee, Sue Lyall, Susie Cottrill, Bryan Plester, Brenda
Hulland, Stephen Burston, Paul Burston, David New,
Anna Clements, Bob Kington and Adrina and Alan Price.
And in a moment of silence we hold before you now,
any others known personally to us.

Silence

May the Spirit of God:

Fill us to overflowing

Great God of unending being,
fill death with your life
and the dying with hope in you.

We hold before you those who have died recently, among
them Henny Elgers Lems.

And among those whose anniversary of death falls at this
time,

We remember with love and gratitude: Jill Hughes, John
Gerrard, Bron Layton, Gordon Watkins, Matthew Graham,
Richard Bolton, Michael Francis, Ron Phillips, Ann Quiney, Ken
Quiney, Di Richards, and David Cornock-Taylor.

Prepare us all for life which lasts forever.

Silence

May the Spirit of God:
Fill us to overflowing.

Great God of all creation,
fill our mouths with praises
and our hearts with gratitude,
for all the glory that surrounds us.

Merciful father,

**Accept these prayers
For the sake of your Son,**

Our Saviour Jesus Christ. Amen.

We pray the Lord's Prayer together as Jesus taught us, saying:

**Our Father in heaven,
hallowed be your name,
your kingdom come,
your will be done,
on earth as in heaven.
Give us today our daily
bread.
Forgive us our sins
as we forgive those who
sin against us.
Lead us not into
temptation
but deliver us from evil.
For the kingdom, the
power,
and the glory are yours
now and for ever.
Amen.**

**Our Father, who art in
heaven,
hallowed be thy name;
thy kingdom come;
thy will be done;
on earth as it is in heaven.
Give us this day our daily
bread.
And forgive us our
trespasses,
as we forgive those who
trespass against us.
And lead us not into
temptation;
but deliver us from evil.
For thine is the kingdom,
the power and the glory,
for ever and ever.
Amen.**

Words for reflection

***Do not be afraid**, for I have redeemed you;
I have called you by your name; You are mine.*

When you walk through the waters I'll be with you,
You will never have to sink beneath the waves.
Do not be afraid...

When the fear of loneliness is looming,
Then remember I am at your side.
Do not be afraid...

When you dwell in the exile of a stranger,
Remember you are precious in my eyes.
Do not be afraid...

You are mine, O my child; I am your father,
And I love you with a perfect love.
Do not be afraid...

Blessed assurance, Jesus is mine;
Oh, what a foretaste of glory divine!
Heir of salvation, purchase of God,
Born of His Spirit, washed in His blood.
*This is my story, this is my song,
Praising my Saviour all the day long.
This is my story, this is my song,
Praising my Saviour all the day long.*

Perfect submission, perfect delight,
Visions of rapture now burst on my sight;
Angels descending, bring from above
Echoes of mercy, whispers of love.

Perfect submission, all is at rest,
I in my Saviour am happy and blest;
Watching and waiting, looking above,
Filled with His goodness, lost in His love.

SENDING

May God the Father,
who led the wise men by the shining of a star
to find the Christ, the Light from light,
lead us also in our pilgrimage to find the Lord.

Amen.

May God the Son,
who turned water into wine at the wedding feast at Cana,
transform our lives and make glad our hearts.

Amen.

May God the Holy Spirit,
who came upon the beloved Son
at his baptism in the river Jordan,
pour out his gifts on us
who have come to the waters of new birth.

Amen.

And may the blessing of God Almighty,
the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit,
be among us and remain with us always.

Amen.

Lord, for the years your love has kept and guided,
Urged and inspired us, cheered us on our way,
Sought us and saved us, pardoned and provided:
Lord of the years, we bring our thanks today.

Lord, for our world in this our generation,
Lives scarred by grieving, loneliness and care:
For young and old, for commonwealth and nation,
Lord of our land, be pleased to hear our prayer.

Lord for ourselves; in living power remake us -
Calling us forth to journey to your throne,
Past put behind us, for the future take us:
Lord of our lives, to rest in You alone.