

Sermon St. James, Cambridge - Baptism of Christ, 12 January 2014
The Revd Jutta Brueck

Isaiah 42.1-9

Ps. 29

Acts 10.34-43

Matthew 3.13-17

[A babe takes every heart by storm, but who will heed the man? ...The Word has come to the end the war which Adam first began. O bless the Babe who sleeps on straw. And listen to the man. (from a poem by Fred Pratt Green)]

Christmas tree is still up here at St. James – I guess that most of yours will be down by now. Ours is still up because we are still in the Christmas season , (though we call it ‘Epiphany’). And I think that’s really important. January is quite a difficult time for many people – the festivities of Christmas are over; our church celebrations are more somber again; our family and friends have gone; the joy over the presents is giving way to getting used to having them. And life is back to normal, at home, at work, at school – whatever everyday life holds for us. And it’s dark and cold; and many people are actually feeling down; perhaps because January and February bring the anniversaries of the death of loved ones. Therefore it is really important that the good news of Christmas, God coming among us to share our ‘flesh’, the Christ child bringing light and hope into the darkness of our world – it’s really important that we continue to hear and see this message.

That’s why the Church calendar makes good sense when it carries on with the Christmas/Epiphany season until the 2nd of February.

But today we are asked to shift our focus from the baby in the crib to the man – as we think about Jesus’ Baptism.

A poem by Fred Pratt Green puts it like this

The Word must come in human form, in God’s redemptive plan.

....

O bless the Babe who sleeps on straw. And listen to the Man!

People often wonder why Jesus needed to be baptised given that he was the Son of God – as did John the Baptist himself . His immediate reaction, when he saw Jesus approaching was to say: ‘ I need to be baptised by you, and you come to me?’ and Jesus replied ‘Let it be so now’. , ,

Yes, in his baptism, Jesus is revealed as the Son of God.

And, this is another powerful sign of Jesus sharing our humanity – ‘the word became flesh and dwelt among us- Jesus’ baptism models what is to become the central truth for his followers – that embracing Jesus’ death and resurrection in our own baptism is at the heart of who we are and where we are going.

And so, Jesus’ baptism at the start of his public ministry becomes an opportunity for God to show us how he wants to relate to us:

We are all invited to repent, which means, to turn round/ to turn to God, to believe in his Son and to be baptised. And when we say ‘yes’ to baptism, we recognise that we are spiritual beings who have their life in God, who know themselves as children of God, beloved, just as Jesus was beloved. We say we are re-born in the Spirit ...we are first and foremost God’s children, called to accept the gift of God’s Spirit and love with us.

In one of his sermons Rowan Williams puts it like this: ‘to be baptised means ‘to turn around and look where we’ve never looked before, trust the one who is calling you and drop under the water of his overflowing compassion. Be with him. Join the new human race, re-created in the Spirit of mutual love and delight and service.’ (Choose life, p.103) Wow! That’s amazing – although a lot of the times we don’t experience life like this ... but I hope, sometimes we do...especially when we stop and think about it.

With baptism, there are two things going on:

First - there is the wonderful affirmation for each one of us of God’s unconditional love and forgiveness ; God says to us: you are my beloved daughter/ son, and my Holy Spirit is with you whatever your circumstances, especially if you are weak and vulnerable.

Secondly, we are not isolated as God’s children, we become part of the body of Christ – we join the family of the Church and being part of this body, this community is central, too. You can’t be a Christian in isolation – when we accept the invitation of baptism – with accept the invitation to live in mutual relationships of love and service. And that’s what Rowan Williams talks about when he says ‘join the new human race, re-created by the Spirit of mutual love and delight and service ‘– that is God’s vision for the world which he reveals in Jesus. Our ‘turning around, looking where we have not looked before’ is to chose to be part of this vision. I know, the Church isn’t always brilliant at embodying this, but this is our calling. And when we start to look we may find much more than meets the eye.

Sometimes we get glimpses ...perhaps especially at Christmas, when friend and stranger go out of their way to reach out to other, caring and sharing. But also at other times, when we are touched by unexpected and exceptional kindness of friends or even strangers.

And that's why Jesus baptism is so important – every year, as we move from the baby stories to looking at the man we are reminded of this vision – a humanity in which people care for one another, especially for those who are weak or vulnerable; a humanity, where forgiveness and generosity are at the heart of relationships – and a willingness to change and grow together.

If we make any New Year's resolutions, perhaps they could be about how to live more closely with Jesus, how to learn more deeply from Jesus, who came and shared our human lives, who wants us to know his love and his peace.

As Christians we have a rhythm of life that helps us to live out baptismal calling, whether we are aware of it or not. Coming to church on Sundays, attending a home group, visiting friends or neighbours who are housebound, reading the Scriptures, praying regularly is all part of following Jesus' example, as well as taking a stand for justice and peace.

God is with us and wants us to lean on him/ or her; God wants us to allow the Holy Spirit to be in all our living and working and resting. The invitation is start every day placing ourselves, the people on our hearts, our worries, the tasks that lie ahead in God's hands, and trusting and opening our eyes to God's presence; God is there especially when we are feeling down, low in confidence, anxious. We may also want to end the day by taking time to look back over the day and ask God to show where she has been present with us.

The Word has come to the end the war which Adam first began. O bless the Babe who sleeps on straw. And listen to the man. (from a poem by Fred Pratt Green)

Jesus came to share and renew humanity, to show us the kingdom of God in our midst. We live in the here and not-yet, and the cross in one form or another is still a reality of our human existence. But the big difference is that we are not carrying it alone. Jesus carries it with us, through his presence in the Spirit, through the love and service of other people, through his presence in the Scriptures and in the Sacraments, especially Holy Communion .

Amen.

