

‘Out of the depths’ – A Homily for the Baptism of Christ

Isaiah 43.1-7

Acts 8.14-17

Luke 3.15-17, 21-22

‘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.’

So says the prophet Isaiah in our first reading today. Before the pandemic it was perhaps a little too easy for us to think of ourselves as untouchable, enclosed individuals, safe and protected from the fragile vulnerabilities that characterised those who have gone before us. Too easy to domesticate our world, to see it as a calm sea easily navigated. But if we are honest, life has always been as unpredictable as the ocean and our sense of self caught up in turmoil and confusion. The world as we know it remains at all times a world of lostness, of fragmentation and exile.

The great truth at the heart of Christian faith is that God doesn’t scoop us away from this world into a place of abstract spiritual contemplation or towards some cosy privatised heaven, but that rather he meets us here, right in the middle of its dark ambiguity. Christmas and Epiphany are the great feasts of this truth, the truth of incarnation, revealing a God who steps right into the mess and danger of human life, a God who allows himself the risk of human flesh, a God who loves us from the inside out.

Christ’s baptism, the feast we are celebrating today, throws us deeply into this mystery of God who lives, dies and rises again in total solidarity with the human race. Not baptism as just a family affair with much cooing over a new-born child, but rather a fully grown adult stepping into the swirling chaos of human life and dragging a new creation out of it. This is Jesus literally immersed into our life, descending into it and then lifting it into the light and presence of God.

This is what Gregory of Nazianzus, a fourth century theologian and Bishop of

Constantinople has to say, 'Jesus rises from the waters and the world rises with him. The heavens like Paradise with its flaming sword, closed by Adam for himself and his descendants, are rent open... The Spirit descends in bodily form like the dove that so long ago announced the ending of the flood and so gives honour to the body that is one with God.' Gregory here speaks of Jesus' resurrection power lifting us out of despair and death as 'the world rises with him.' Stanley Spencer, my favourite British artist, has a wonderful painting of Christ rising from sleep, in which he depicts Christ almost as an arrow of light and power, blasting off from the ground that reels beneath him. A heavenward power that nothing can resist. This is just the image that Gregory presents us with here, as penetrating into our guilt and dislocation Christ powerfully lifts us into the compassionate heart of the Father.

In this way, the baptism of Christ is nothing less than the revelation of God himself, a God who through his incarnation makes himself one with us, becoming fully human so that we can become fully divine. But we too share in Christ's own baptism. Sometimes we forget this as our baptisms so often happen when we were children, but perhaps this ancient fragment of how baptisms took place in the first centuries of the Church might jolt us into a new understanding of this powerful sacramental reality: 'on the eve of Easter Sunday, a group of believers has stayed up all night in a vigil of prayer, scripture reading and instruction. The most important moment of their lives is fast approaching, for years they have been preparing for this day. At dawn they are led out to a pool of flowing water. They remove their clothes, and the women let down their hair and take off their jewellery. They renounce satan and are anointed from head to foot with oil, they are led naked into the water, plunged into it bracing stream three-times as they recite the Apostle's Creed. When they finally emerge they are again anointed with oil, clothed, blessed and led to the Eucharistic table where they are fed with bread and wine and sent back into their world to love and to serve.' This account of baptism is taken from Hippolytus' *Apostolic Tradition*.

Christ's baptism – our baptism – reminds us that we are not individuals living in splendid isolation, but that we are called to live in solidarity one with another, that we are

called to live out of the depths of what it means to be really human together, not dwelling on the surface of things, all safe and comfortable, but plunging into the depths, living from the inside-out. This is what the theologian Paul Tillich has to say, 'there is no depth of life without the depth of the common life... the stream of daily news, the waves of daily propaganda, and the tides of conventions and sensationalism keep our minds occupied. The noise of these shallow waters prevents us from listening to the sounds out of the depth, to the sounds of what really happens in the ground of our social structure, in the longing hearts of the masses, and in struggling minds... Our ears are as deaf to the cries out of the social depth as they are to the cries out of the depth of our souls.'

If we have the courage to break through the surface and swim into the depth of life, the depth of our soul in all its wonder and exile and the depth of our shared humanity in all its joy and despair, then we will discover that we are not alone, but that Christ meets us there: the fire immersed in the water, the light shining in the darkness, the life breaking down the doors of death itself. AMEN.