

'From Exile Wanderings to Baptismal Life' –

A Homily for the Baptism of the Lord

Isaiah 43.1-7

Acts 8.14-17

Luke 3.15-17, 21-22

At times it can feel as if the whole world is a chaotic place. As we enter a new year it feels that nothing has changed much, on the news we still hear and see stories of utter political chaos, wanton human violence and the inhumane posturing of supposed empire builders. In our own country, Parliament is back in session but its feeling more like a bar brawl rather than the highest court in the country; we have witnessed horrifying images of an out of control car careering into a nightclub full of people; in the United States, government continues to be in shutdown, depriving thousands of pay as the president and Democrats face off against each other; and the spectre of racism has reared its ugly head with violent scenes on football fields in the UK. In a world as chaotic as this, it can feel that God is a far-away dream.

The prophet Isaiah speaks to a people in just such a destabilised and disorientated world as this: 'When you pass through the waters, I will be with you... when you walk through fire you shall not be burned, and the flame shall not consume you.' Isaiah's God is not one who magically resolves the chaos and violence of our world, but is rather a God who walks with his people, promising to be with them even in the most dangerous and disturbing of times. So even as we feel lost in exile, or have lost our bearings wandering in the wilderness, the prophet speaks radical words of homecoming and gathering. How is this possible? Because God is not impotent or absent, but rather the force within creation itself, it is this God that created us and forms us, and we are to remember that creation in the Hebrew Scriptures is never a one off and far-away act, but is rather what God is doing now, an endlessly active and creative process of calling into being the things that are not, of shaping order and beauty out of formless chaos.

And if we are tempted to think of ourselves as the Church as a people who look back to how things were, to ancient promise only half remembered, our second reading taken from the Acts of the Apostles dramatically orientates us in the opposite direction. This incredible book narrates the story of the fledgling church as it learns to live out the disarming newness of the resurrection. Our reading today is of the outpouring of the Spirit on the Samaritans, this fiery movement cannot be contained in Jerusalem and continues to spill ever outward, an abundant gift filling the universal church with vitality and power. This is another new beginning, a powerful and promising one as it is nothing less than the Spirit of God - that same Spirit that hovered over the waters of creation - pouring over the Samaritans the richness of resurrection life.

At times we might feel ourselves to be small and isolated here, strangely out of step with the community around us, doggedly holding onto transitions and rituals that seem to have lost their significance or power in the world. But wait, this same Spirit who shaped the creation of the world came to the estranged Samaritan people, overwhelming their isolation, their dysfunction and their grief with a new language of hope and faith and love, and with a new vision of what was now possible for the world. Let us pray today that this Holy Spirit will visit us with a new language and a new vision for ourselves.

In our Gospel reading today, John the Baptist contrasts his ministry, that of baptism with water, with that of the Coming One who will baptise with 'the Holy Spirit and fire.' In Jesus we see most clearly our God drawing near to us, immersing himself right into the swirling waters of the Jordan river, clothing himself with our very flesh in all its beauty, its woundedness and its curse. Here the whole world is given another chance at freedom, re-creation, redemption, renewal as the heavens are literally torn apart and the powers of above are made available below. Here humanity as it is dipped into the swirling waters of the Jordan is remade as the Spirit is poured out. This is a moment just like the first moment of creation, but it is also a pentecostal moment, giving us a glimpse of our future humanity as it is set on fire by the presence of God-with-us.

Remember the story of Noah and the Ark where devastating floods threatened to overcome humanity and the world, where destructive, chaotic powers engulfed the world once called 'good' by the Lord? Remember when the seas parted and dry ground once more appeared? The promise of a new day beyond guilt and pain and loss was prefigured by a tiny little dove, that little piece of heaven that flew out and alighted on the new creation. Here that dove rests on Jesus - the ultimate promise of new beginnings - that in this person the old things of death and chaos and sin will be transformed into the new things of life, love and hope. It is into that life, love and hope that God is calling us into today. AMEN.