

The Joy of a Baptism

Acts 16.9-15

Revelation 21.10,22 - 22.5

John 5.1-9

Today we mark a joyous occasion. Zoe will be baptised in our font, supported by her parents, godparents, her brother Felix, and all of us gathered here.

As water trickles over her forehead and Fr Ryan utters words ripe with beauty and grace, and we look on in wonder and perplexity, we can cast off distracting thoughts and dive into a mystery at once ancient and new. For with each person's baptism, we are invited to drink deeply from the wellsprings of our imaginations and to refresh ourselves at the fount of a reality to which we and all things belong.

Baptism is a practice Jesus gave us. Through his own baptism in the river Jordan, Jesus consecrated water to this use. In doing so, he emphasises just how important water is. Water is as old as the cosmos, yet as revitalising today as it has ever been. Water is a basic element of life. We are made of water. Its significance is not something we have invented. Rather water gives life to the roots of all human meaning across cultures.

Water's importance and its use in baptism criss-cross through our readings today.

In the reading from Acts, we hear a profound echo across history from one woman of antiquity to a little girl of today. Just as Fr Ryan pours water over Zoe's head in twenty-first century Hove, so Paul baptised Lydia in first century Philippi. Through this water Zoe and Lydia are buoyed up in a common existence. Both have been welcomed into the life of the church. Together with every baptised person, they are embraced by the intimacy of God's life shown in Jesus and shared in a tangible human community.

This gives new depth to water's significance for life. As the reading from Revelation puts it, this intimacy with God is the true water of life that flows from the heart of God and irrigates human hearts. In baptism, each person comes to share in Jesus' own relationship to the Father in a way unique to them. Each baptised person is marked out as a precious gift from God. In their face, the face of God shines out. Here we can see how the waters of baptism are, as Revelation puts it, for the healing of nations – for the very health of society depends on valuing the dignity of each person.

But as our Gospel tells us, in Jesus God seeks to celebrate not just the dignity of each person but their wellbeing – their true health and flourishing. In Jesus, God draws close to us in the frailty of our human existence so that we may be restored to the fullness of life shared with others.

Here we can see how the waters of baptism are fundamentally about joy. God's joy in every single person; a joy that echoes in our own hearts as we delight in those we love and their wellbeing. As an image of this mingling of divine and human joy, we need look no further than water's own capacity to give joy. Just think of a baby gleefully playing away in a bath; or, children dancing under the spray of a water sprinkler; or, adults as they abandon caution to the wind and, with a surge of excitement, dive into a crystal clear ocean. To celebrate the joy of others in this way is the calling of all those who are baptised and who baptise.

This is why we baptise our children. We are embracing the joy of who they are; the joy they give to the world. In the promises they make today, Zoe's parents and godparents, together with all of us, are, for Zoe's sake, making a stand for joy in this troubled world. Zoe, like all young children, is only dimly aware of the joy she causes. She must be brought to the awareness of the joy she gives through others' love and nurture. But she also demands this from the adult world; demands with her whole being that we do not forget that she and every person is worthy of joy, made for joy. As she grows into her baptismal identity, Zoe too will need to discover how to be an ambassador for such joy; to search for it in the midst of human society; to champion it all the more whenever it is threatened.

The very nature of joy means this is always a shared task. Joy thirsts after friendship, family, community, faith, love. And we pray that these things will fill Zoe's life. For our true joy is that, like the water of life itself, we cannot be the source of joy on our own. We give and receive it only with others. This is because ultimately joy belongs to God who indiscriminately wishes it upon everyone. God creates all things for the sheer joy of it. In Jesus, God shares his joy with all humanity in the midst of suffering and recalls us to our true vocation: that we are creatures who are truly in our element when splashing about in a joy divine.

So let us, with Zoe, stirred by the grace of baptism, plunge into this joy that it may ripple through our lives and relationships, watering wearied spirits, quenching thirsty hearts, and spill over into acts of justice that build up joy in our communities. And as the company of the baptised, young and old alike, let us be true to this our common calling so that God's joy can work through us for the healing of this and every nation, and all things can sing of the joy that overflows to the ends of the earth. Amen.