

Sermon for Divonne 10th January 2016 - Baptism of Christ - HC with anointing

Called by name

Readings: Isaiah 43: 1-7

Luke 3: 15-17, 21-22

May I speak in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

There is something very powerful in the idea that God calls each of us by name. Our names, usually chosen by our parents when we are born, become more than just names as we grow into them. I remember when our second daughter Lucie was born, my mum said 'Oh you're not going to call her that are you' and I said 'Yes I am actually' and of course our Lucie became the unique Lucie that she will always be. And my mum came to love her name.

Our names signal our identity, as time goes on they state something of who we are. And the use of the name during baptism confers something from God – it affirms us in the eyes of God. I was involved in the baptism of three little girls last year – Flora and Layla here and Emilia Pal in Gingins- and it is a very simple and special moment when we come to the pouring of water on the child's head:

....Flora Elizabeth, Emilia Alice, Layla June, I baptise you in the name of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.... And it is very simple and special in the way that through the naming, and the act of pouring water whilst invoking the Trinity, the child is affirmed as being intimately and eternally God's child.

And of course water features very strongly in the rite of baptism, and very strongly in the Bible. It is mentioned 722 times! Think of all the stories where water plays a huge role – Noah and the ark, Moses in the bulrushes, the crossing of the Red Sea, Jesus walking on water, Jesus calming the storm, the great catch of fish....

Water is a presence through the story of our faith, even coming to represent Jesus 'the living water' in John's gospel and it is crucial to human life – in fact the human body itself is about 60% water.

In our passages today, water features prominently, but in the Isaiah passage, with the allusion to the crossing of the Red Sea, it is presented as something dangerous, overwhelming, not safe, needing the protection of God. "When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you."

This passage was written when the exile in Babylon was about to end and the people were looking to God to be with them through what would be a major upheaval in returning home. They were in a hard place and had serious doubts and hesitations about the future.

In contrast, in Luke's passage, water is cleansing and part of a new religious ritual. So already there are two sides to the overall picture our readings offer us, and more going on than meets the eye.

In digging a bit deeper, I'd like us to look together more closely at the passage from Luke. It is an important one for this season of Epiphany which we began last week. Now there is a huge amount to say and we would be here until next weekend if we tried to say it all, so I am choosing a few angles here.

The first one is something Heidi told me in the week, which is that the phrase in verse 22 "I am well pleased" in the original Greek – eudokesa – conveys a sense of indefiniteness, both past and present. The verb is in a tense that does not exist in English so it is translated into the present tense, but in fact the original Greek would offer deeper meaning – God loved Jesus in the past and in the present, eternally. He had always loved him and been pleased with him. And that is the affirmation that we also receive at our baptism as our name is said – it gives us our place in eternity.

The next point I'd like to make is that in Luke's version of the baptism, Jesus is baptised alongside everyone else. He lines up with all the others, and waits his turn.

The actual moment is not even recorded, unlike in Mark and Matthew's versions. Matthew records an actual conversation between Jesus and John. Here it is simply stated 'and when Jesus also had been baptised...and was praying...' Luke's special emphasis is not on who baptised Jesus or why he needed to be baptized in the first place, but on prayer, followed by the acclamation that all three gospel writers include with different wording. Luke's is personal to Jesus 'You are my Son...with you I am well pleased...'

A good point to note here is the manifestation of the 3 persons of the Trinity – Jesus as man, the Holy Spirit as a dove, and the voice of the Father.

Now the next thing I'd like to say is that there are 3 verses missing in this passage the lectionary gives us – verses 18, 19 and 20. And those missing verses tell us about John the Baptist's imprisonment by King Herod. And of course we know from Mark and Matthew that later John was cruelly beheaded at the request of Herodias, Herod's wife.

So those 3 verses, missing from what the Church in its wisdom has given us in the lectionary, serve to get John off the stage of history before Jesus begins his ministry. John's work is done and Jesus' is just beginning. In John's Gospel, John the Baptist is recorded as saying 'He must increase, but I must decrease.'

But the arrest of John also adds a sombre note to the joyful epiphany that follows for Jesus – that moment of revelation, affirmation by God: "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased." And there's a foreshadowing, a hint of what is to befall Jesus later on.

So here we get a fuller picture of what it means to be called by name – our identity is given, we are assured of God's personal love for us, but we must be prepared for that to lead to places which may even be dangerous. Yes, like the people addressed by Isaiah, we may have to walk through the raging waters or the burning flames.

I read one commentary which suggested that these stories of Epiphany are stories of light, but they also have a shadow side, and that there may not always be happy ever afters.

So, I looked at those missing verses, and I also then read on to the next verse after the end of this passage. And that was fascinating too. “Now Jesus himself was about 30 years old when he began his ministry. He was the son, *so it was thought*, of Joseph.” So it was thought. That seems a bit cheeky of Luke!

Then follows a long genealogy for Joseph, lasting 38 lines, and ending with “the son of Seth, the son of Adam, the son of God”. For Luke, what was important was not who Jesus was through his birth parents, but who he was through God and this is emphasized twice by saying ‘so it was thought’ and then finishing with ‘son of God.’

This is an important insight for us too. It makes baptism very important because ultimately what really matters is that we are assured of that connection with God, using our name and water and the names and persons of God. To be called by name in that way has profound implications – we don’t know where that calling will lead us, and it might not all be plain sailing, we might not have the happy ever after. That same commentary I mentioned says “Epiphany is deep water – you can’t dip your toes in. You must take a breath and plunge.”

And we do that because we know that God is there, eternally saying ‘You are my daughter, my son, the Beloved. With you I am well pleased.’ From the start of time to the end of time, you are loved by me and I am pleased with you. Amen.