

ANGLICAN CHAPLAINCY OF ALL SAINTS' MARSEILLE

WITH AIX-EN-PROVENCE AND THE LUBERON

Sermon – First Sunday of Epiphany - Baptism of Christ

9th January 2022

All Saints' Marseille

The Revd Jamie Johnston, Chaplain

We might easily get confused with the chronology in these Sundays after Christmas. Last week we celebrated the coming of the Magi to pay homage to the infant Jesus. In three weeks' time, at Candlemas, we will celebrate the still infant Jesus being presented in the Temple. But this Sunday we suddenly fast forward to the thirty year old Jesus, at his baptism in the River Jordan by John, and next week we will again see the thirty year old Jesus, in the synagogue at Nazareth, announcing that Isaiah's vision of the 'year of the Lord's favour' has arrived. What these readings have in common, as Roxana noted last week, is that they are all examples of the revelation of Jesus to those who had, in different ways, longed for his coming.

The story of Jesus's baptism comes in all four Gospels, so it is foundational to our faith. It is also foundational to the Church, as we see from the architecture of its buildings. There is always a font, usually near the door as a symbol of its marking the entry into faith. It's interesting to compare the different size and shape of fonts in churches. The one here in Marseille is beautiful but, like many, it's fairly small. This week I came across an article by Canon Mark Oakley (a

former Archdeacon of this Diocese) called 'Forget the Birdbath'. He points out that, in ancient churches, baptisteries used to be enormous – sometimes a separate room, even a separate building. There is a good example in the Cathedral at Aix, built in the 6th century. It is one of the baptisteries you went right down into, like Jesus in the River Jordan.

In the early church some fonts were even designed like tombs. This is because, from earliest times, an association was made by the Church between baptism and the death and resurrection of Jesus. Jesus goes down into the depths, and comes up to hear the voice that he is a loved child, embraced and held for ever by God. The divine love of which we are assured in baptism is stronger than the grave and will not let us go. Nonetheless, an old way of living and understanding has to die before the new life can enter us. St Cyril of Jerusalem wrote: 'When you went down into the water it was like the night and you could see nothing, but when you came up again it was like finding yourself in the day. That one moment was your death and your birth, that saving water was both your grave and your mother.' That's why some fonts were designed to resemble the womb.

Mark Oakley writes about the baptistery in the church of St John Lateran in Rome, designed to hold a great amount of water, the amount needed (as he puts it) 'to wash your regrets and failures off, to cleanse your humanity, to drown all the damaging messages we can transmit to others and ourselves, in order that we might hear the voice of love from heaven'. He adds: 'Unfortunately, today you also find there a sort of Italian bathtub of the seventeenth century and across this a wooden plank and on the plank a small bowl with a tiny dish on it in which baptisms are celebrated today. This is a sad reflection of how we can reduce, literally, the way we celebrate baptism and

consequently understand baptism'. No womb-like font, where nourishment and growth were provided to a soul in development. No tomb-like font, where people were immersed into the depths and drenched in grace. Just 'an apologetic pudding bowl or birdbath with a few polite drips of water'.

Baptism is partly about shedding our former selves. Visiting a large baptistery like the one at Aix is a good reminder of this, especially when we feel sullied, guilty when we have made such a mess of things that it is difficult to know how to begin again. We need to remember that we were cleansed in baptism once and for all, and that however much we get things wrong this can never be taken away from us. It's why we can only be baptised once. That's the power of God.

Baptism is also about being assured of the love of God, wherever we are and for all time. When Jesus goes down into the river, all the voices around him are drowned out. When he comes up again he hears the only voice that matters, that of God the Father, the voice to which he goes on to attend throughout his ministry. I wonder which voices we listen to. How often do we stop to listen to the voice of God?

When Jesus emerges from the water there is also a dove, like the Spirit which hovered over the waters of creation in the Book of Genesis, like the dove that brought peace to Noah as the waters of the flood receded, confirming a covenant of love into the future. An embodiment of the Holy Spirit, the divine energy that drives all the events of Jesus's life. I wonder how attuned we are to the promptings of the Spirit in ours.

Above all, we need to remember the words from Chapter 43 of Isaiah which we heard this morning: 'you are precious in my sight, and honoured, and I love you.' That's the promise of our baptism. As Jesus rises out of the water he hears similar words: 'You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.' Isaiah 43 is the reading that has spoken in so many ways into these years of pandemic, and speaks to us still:

Do not fear, for I have redeemed you;
I have called you by name, you are mine.
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. ...
You are precious in my sight, and honoured, and I love you.'

They are words that apply to all our struggles – physical, mental, emotional, spiritual, professional, social – all. In some ways they are all we need to know. They are the words which Jesus heard, coming up out of the water to begin the ministry that would lead him into controversy and danger, through suffering, death and beyond. They are the words each of us can hear now, as we gather at the altar to receive Christ, the living bread. And they are the words that will carry us through whatever we have to face:

'Do not fear, for I have redeemed you ...
You are precious in my sight, and honoured, and I love you.'

Amen.