

ANGLICAN CHAPLAINCY OF ALL SAINTS' MARSEILLE

WITH AIX-EN-PROVENCE AND THE LUBERON

Sermon – First Sunday after Epiphany – 10th January 2021

The Baptism of Christ

All Saints' Marseille

The Revd Jamie Johnston, Chaplain

When I saw that I was due to preach today on the baptism of Christ, my first thought was to look forward to it, for it is such a beautiful story. As Jesus emerges from the water, he feels the touch of the Spirit and hears words from heaven that are among the most beautiful any person will ever hear: 'You are my child. I love you. You delight me.' Preaching on baptism is usually an opportunity to deliver an upbeat message about our faith in the trinitarian God.

But I began to feel a bit uneasy about preaching today, for two reasons. First, in recent years the atmosphere of a typical Church of England baptism service has become increasingly happy and clappy, at the same time as the language used in the service has become more sombre, referring more to sin and evil and death than in earlier versions (though this is actually a reconnection with the language of the early Church). This apparent mismatch can create a tension between what is apparently going on and what is being said. Sometimes when I take a non-churchgoing family through the responses, I sense their unease grow at what they might be getting their child into, when they thought this was going to be a happy occasion with all the family there and nice photos afterwards.

Secondly, I don't think any of us is feeling particularly upbeat at the moment. The news from the UK about the new variant of the coronavirus is anything but upbeat. It is downright scary. From a number of conversations I have had with friends there this week, it seems that even those who have felt mentally resilient for the last year are struggling. Within our chaplaincy the list of families affected by this crisis, directly or indirectly, grows ever longer. (You will have noticed that the number of people for whom we are praying by name on Sundays has trebled over the last few weeks.) It doesn't feel as though there's much to be happy or clappy about this morning.

And yet baptism is fundamental to our Christian faith. It is so foundational that you can only do it once. Even if you wish to change denominations, you can't get baptised again. It's that basic to our identity. Happy and sombre? Clappy and scary? What, we might ask, is going on?

If we look at Mark's account of Jesus's baptism, there is actually a tension there already. In the words used - 'You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased' - Mark's original hearers would have picked up two separate scriptural references. 'You are my Son' is from verse 7 of Psalm 2, words which were part of the coronation ritual for a Judean king. But this is combined with the words: 'With you I am well pleased', which are from Isaiah 42.1, introducing the Servant of the Lord - the one who would establish justice, bring captives out from the dungeons, but who would also suffer terribly. So there is tension, even in that sentence. This is a king, but also the Suffering Servant, the figure from the prophecy of Isaiah with whom Jesus closely identified. We begin to see why tensions might also be felt within the liturgy of baptism.

While I was pondering these things, I came across a small book by Rowan Williams with the disarmingly simple title *Being Christian*. In it he reflects on these tensions and shows that they are in fact a natural part of the Christian life. I found his reflections on baptism very helpful for the time we are living through, so I hope you will allow me to share them with you.

Rowan Williams notes that the root of the word 'baptism' means simply 'to dip', to immerse something. The Gospels record John baptising people by immersing them in the River Jordan. But Jesus also uses the word 'baptism' to refer to the suffering and death that lie ahead of him (Mark 10.38). He speaks in terms of being immersed in them, 'swamped' by them. From the very beginning, 'baptism' into the Christian community was associated with the idea of going down into the darkness of Jesus's suffering and death, of being 'swamped' by the reality of what he endured.

As the early Church began to reflect on this and to shape its liturgy, another set of associations developed. The story of Jesus's baptism, as told in the Gospels, tells of Jesus going down into the water of the Jordan, and when coming up out of it the Holy Spirit descends on him in the form of a dove, and a voice speaks from heaven. The early Christians began to make connections with another story involving water and the Spirit, those words from the first chapter of Genesis which we heard this morning. Water in the Bible is traditionally the symbol of chaos. God's Spirit hovers over it, and out of the chaos comes the world, and God says 'this is good'. What with the water and the Spirit and the voice, the early Christians began to associate baptism with the exact image that St Paul used for the Christian life: 'new creation'. Baptism came to be looked on

as a restoration of what it is to be truly human. To be baptized was to recover the humanity God first intended – that we should live with such love and trust in him that we could be called God’s sons and daughters.

Importantly, this is not about being exclusive or protected in some way. The new humanity created around Jesus is not a humanity that is always going to be happy or successful or in control of things, but a humanity that can reach out its hand from the depths of chaos to be touched by the hand of God. It means that, if you ask where you might expect to find the baptized, one answer is ‘in the neighbourhood of chaos’. You will find Christian people near those places where humanity is most at risk, most in need. You will find them in the neighbourhood of Jesus, and Jesus is invariably to be found near human confusion and suffering.

Rowan Williams adds that you might also expect to find the baptized Christian near to, or in touch with, the chaos in their own life – because all of us have muddle inside us too - and baptism means not being afraid to look with honesty at that. It means being with Jesus ‘in the depths’ – the depths of human need, including the depths of our own selves in their need – but also in the depths of God’s love; in the depths where the Spirit is re-creating human life as God intended it to be.

All this seems to me very relevant for our time, a source of comfort for those not feeling at their most resilient at the moment, and a profound source of hope. As the author puts it:

‘The person who has been baptized is not only in the middle of human suffering and muddle but also in the middle of the love and delight of the

Father, Son and Holy Spirit. That surely is one of the most extraordinary mysteries of being Christian. We are in the middle of two things that seem quite contradictory: in the middle of the heart of God, and in the middle of a world of threat, suffering, sin and pain. And because Jesus has taken his stand right in the middle of those two realities, that is where we take ours.'

So perhaps the time we are living through is not as unprecedented as we think. And that, instead of a sermon on baptism being difficult to preach or to hear at the moment because it is difficult to feel upbeat, we have been reminded that baptism is profoundly rooted in how things are. And that, however much our instinct might be to seek refuge from suffering, it is actually where we are called to be. For when we are called to be where Jesus is, we must let our defences down as we immerse ourselves into his life, death and resurrection. And then, by grace, we will find that within the depths of human chaos we are strengthened by his Spirit as we take our stand with Jesus in his risks of love and solidarity.

And that is why, as we come up out of the waters of baptism, we may hear the words that Jesus himself heard: 'This is my son, my daughter.' And know that we are part of a humanity that can reach out its hand from the depths of chaos, to be touched by the hand of God.

Amen.