

**Sunday 10.1.16 St P&P 10.00am**

**Luke 3 Baptism of Christ**

*Loving Lord, give us all this morning a deeper knowledge of what it is to be loved by you, and filled with your Holy Spirit. In Jesus name. Amen*

As we dip our toes into this New Year –the wise men having been and gone –and we come almost immediately to the Baptism of Christ. There is a chronological reason of course -but the resonance -the meaning that makes sense straight away -is that it has to do with beginnings, with foundations. So often in life we try to tackle difficult situations with the cry ‘I wouldn’t start from here.’ This is just the opposite. Here with the Baptism of Christ is where we can start this year.

Towards the end of last year we all felt the shock waves of the Paris attacks, and we’ve just gone past the anniversary of the Charlie Hebdo atrocity. Did you see the cover of their 1 year on publication? It is a black and white picture of what is obviously supposed to be God. The only colour is the red of the blood on his clothes. The caption read ‘the assassin is still on the run’

Oh my! That’s harsh! But you can see why. These guys had their friends and colleagues murdered in the name of God.

As Anglican Archbishops meet next week I was reading a prayer for those meeting which went:

‘From those who use the bible to threaten and abuse  
**O God deliver us.’**

The problem is obvious. Where in our faith do we find both solace and hope for this year?

Carolyn gave a very powerful assembly just after the Paris nightmare in which she gently led the children to understand that the only answer to anger and violence is more love.

I suspect that we know this. We know that responding to hatred with more hatred inevitably makes things worse. But we are also only too aware of the limitations of our own ability to allow love into our fear.

What we are talking about here is how we might possibly grow into the sort of person for whom love is their core; who is able to think, and feel and act lovingly as a way of life -not primarily as an act of the will, but because of who they growing into being.

It is a beautiful ideal. It is the ideal I try to hold up before young parents as they think through the baptism of their child. It is the ideal that naturally and rightly makes sense to us – whether we actually see ourselves as religious or not. It is what in the end will be the main identifier of the quality of the way we live our lives. St John of the Cross puts it this way: *‘when the evening of this life comes, we shall be judged on love.’* The American writer Raymond Carver -when he was dying of cancer wrote this little poem:

*And did you get what  
You wanted from this life, even so?  
I did.*

*And what did you want?  
To call my self beloved,  
to feel beloved on earth.*

And there’s the rub really. In order to grow the capacity to love, in order to develop into a loving person we deeply and urgently need to know ourselves to be ‘beloved on earth’

St John knew this. ‘We love’ he writes, ‘we love because he loved us first.’ He isn’t saying we love God because he first loved us (though that follows) he is saying that we become capable of love because we are loved. To develop into a loving person we need to discover what it means to be loved.

I’ve been reading a harrowing book this Christmas about the effect of being sent to boarding school when you are very young -6,7,8.

These schools have changed beyond recognition nowadays and there isn’t the brutality that earlier generations experienced. But - Did you know for

example that there was a school where, if their rotten food make you sick, your vomit would be scooped up and taken to the headmasters office where you would be say down in front of him and made to eat it?

Thank God it's not like that now. But the psychiatrist writing the book did so through a series of case studies of people who were outwardly very successful, but who were unable to see themselves as lovable, because they had been brought up from such a young age by people who didn't love them.

With help these people were able to get back in touch with that little child and have compassion on them, and build their lives again. But it was a very vivid example of how much we depend on having been loved to develop the capacity to do so.

For most of us, loved by parents; for the fortunate, by friends, husband, wife or partner; for all of us -if we did but know it, and more than we can conceive -by God.

Jesus -being truly, fully human shares this with us. Quite clearly he was loved. Loved by his parents -the frantic search when he went missing in Jerusalem -the flashes of insight we get into Mary's love for her son. Loved by his flaky disciples -and of course loved by his Father -by God.

As Jesus stood up -emerged from the water of baptism this is what God said: : "You are my Son whom I love; with you I am well pleased."

And most amazingly so it is for each one of us. You may not actually hear it, but there is surely a voice from heaven saying of each one of us here -you are my child -my son -my daughter.

Have you any idea what that means?

Think what a good human parent feels for their child -A parent feels love, feels deep longings for their child, wanting the very best for them. Wishing for them as they grow up that they will grow healthy and flourish. That they will have a huge capacity to love and be loved, that they will reach their potential, become their true selves. That they will have inner courage and strength, that they will live life with integrity.

A good parent will know that if need be they would lay down their own life for their beloved child.

How can we grasp that that is what God longs for us? Only a zillion times more.

When any of us says that we are a child of God - we hear that voice from heaven which whispers in your ear *-remember -you are my child* -do you grasp the enormity of that?

God actively, deeply loves you, better even than the best parent could ever do - and of course -so much that he did indeed lay down his life for you.

It is a challenging concept for us to imagine -but Jesus needed to know himself loved by God -just as we need to know ourselves loved by God. It forms the very bed-rock of being made in God's image.

Now I could go on -with great passion -about this *knowing yourself loved by God* - but the problem isn't really the theory -it is the reality of our personal experience.

For a start you could rightly point out that -lovely as the image of the dove declaring God's love for his Son is -we are not Jesus- he wasn't messed up -we are. Here I think it is helpful to begin with seeing how this related to baptism. As we emerge from the waters of Baptism we are indeed like Christ -or you could say he is indeed like us. We emerge washed -

Let me remind you of a story.....

During the period that my sister was married to Michael -a Greek -we were often on holiday there. One day we stopped at a wayside Taverna for a drink and a coach was parked nearby. It was surrounded by a group of Greek teenagers who turned out to be a Sunday School trip from the island of Tinos. The whole party was being looked after by the Parish Priest -Greek Orthodox of course. He was obviously doing a good job and youngsters seemed to be fond of this young man in his long black robe and flowing beard. He looked a bit unkempt -and we noticed that he was standing alone.

‘Don’t go near him!’ my Greek brother-in-law warned in a low voice.

‘Why ever not?’ we asked.

‘They don’t wash.’ He replied. ‘Old style Greek Orthodox Priests follow St Jermone’s teaching : *He that is once washed in Christ needs not to wash again.* (Letter 14) If you don’t believe me go and stand near him.

Mike was right -the pong was frightful. It goes back to the early days of the Church in the Roman Empire; the Romans were very keen on bathing and it was therefore associated with pagan customs. To show their distinction apparently many early Christians refrained.

They believed that the cleansing of a Christian Baptism in water was so significant that to do anything further was dishonourable to God. *He that is once washed in Christ needs not to wash again.*

If only! John the Baptist knew that when he baptised folk with water - however sorry people were, those he baptised would mess up again -we know that we do -we accept that washing that beings with our baptism - and we accept it week after week after week.

But John the Baptist also knew that his baptism was but a symbol of something deeper that Jesus was to bring. He told the people: When Jesus comes he won’t just baptise you with water, he will baptise you with the Holy Spirit -and then see.’

And the Holy Spirit works on the inside -such that the repentance and change of lifestyle that appeared to hard, so impossible to start with gradually becomes a reality, so that bit by bit we are empowered to live a life worthy of our calling s followers of Jesus Christ.

Another picture:

Imagine you have a lovely garden, in the centre is a lily pond. But keeping it supplied with water is hard work. The sun blazes down and you need to cart buckets of water or devise an elaborate system of pumps to keep it topped up.

The bloke next door does not have to do that. His pond fills slowly and silently of its own accord -there is a hidden source of water -all the time there is an secret flow of living water -and as it flows it constantly

renews in us those words: ‘You are my child whom I love; with you I am well pleased.’

Grasping this however is another matter.

There are those who reject God on intellectual grounds, or who have been so battered by life this telling them are infinitely precious to a loving God seems like a bad joke. There are many more who have somehow missed out in the love stakes and who find it well nigh impossible to connect emotionally with these concepts.

If I stand here and speak too easily of the love of God the consequence is a response on Monday morning from folk who have little sense of their own worth, and, perhaps because of an unhappy childhood or later painful rejection, find talk of the love of God hurtful and empty -even though it may be a truth that they long to possess.

Our calling to love is a tough one -because only the building of a proper relationship in which there is a growth of friendship, proper listening, honesty and a continuing readiness to ‘be there’ may enable those who feel unlovable to feel beloved.

Jesus set off on his ministry after his Baptism -he was never less than perfectly loving -and it was costly. When you begin to love anyone who feels unlovable they will do their best to prove themselves right. Jesus’ love coped with rejection, false accusations, violence. In the end his love had to face the fear of death and isolation. But in the face of it all he continued to love.

As we see from baptism that sort of loving is both human and divine. God loves through us and with us, we love through God and with God -and so transformation can begin.

And you will of course find that it is very practical. Think for example of anyone made redundant -I remember a prayer in the Church Times that began:

‘Redundant -the word says it all -useless, unnecessary, without purpose, surplus to requirements’ -You need a very deep sense of being loved, being of worth within you in order to handle that experience.

Demonstrating to that person that they are indeed lovable is a massive gift. One that you can give!

In other words -one of the main ways that God communicates his love is through one another. More than that -the way we experience being loved by God is by loving one another.

The passage that makes this clear is 1 John 4. Do go home and read that chapter right though.

Here are a couple of highlights:

‘My beloved friends, let us continue to love each other since love comes from God. Everyone who loves is born of God and experiences a relationship with God. The person who refuses to love doesn’t know the first thing about God, because God is love –so you can’t know him if you don’t love.....But if we love one another, God dwells deeply within us and his love becomes complete in us -perfect love.....

We are going to love -love and be loved. First we were loved, now we love. He loved us first.....The command we have from Christ is blunt: Loving God includes loving people. You’ve got to love both.’

Whew! It is a lifetime’s journey. Here’s a practical starter for the coming week. Every single day say this sentence to yourself -keep doing it till you come to realise that God is whispering it in your ear -words from God -you have to believe them:

*“You are my child whom I love; with you I am well pleased.”*

I firmly believe that it is the only way for us all to walk into 2016 -only more love can counter the overcome the darkness. Not abstract love, but real love -yours and mine.

AMEN