

Sunday 13th January 2019
Baptism of Christ C

Liverpool Parish Church

OT: Isaiah 43.1-7

NT: Acts 8.14-17

G: Luke 3.15-17,21-22

The season of Epiphany comes at that time of year when the magic of Christmas has worn off and the decorations are coming down. I always struggle with what to do with the cards. Most of them are ghastly. The portrayals of the Holy Family are sheer kitsch, to say the least. The stable is straight from a Laura Ashley catalogue. It is not much better with the 'wise men'. But, the feast of the Epiphany in the Orthodox East is a celebration not just of the manifestation of Christ to the Gentiles, but also of Christ's Baptism, which here in the West we celebrate today, one Sunday on from Epiphany. Indeed, the Armenian Orthodox Church celebrates Christmas, Epiphany and the Baptism of Christ in one go on the same day, 19 January, which is apparently what the early Christians used to do. So, in Bethlehem where I have just come from, they have three major Christmas celebrations, 25 December, 7 January and 19 January. By the time the Armenians get to their Christmas we are almost hitting Lent.

Christmas of course became popularized in the West through St. Francis of Assisi in the 13th century. Up until then, the main focal celebrations of the Church were around Holy Week and Easter, re-living and reenacting the events around the death and Resurrection of Christ. On the whole, ours is a society without much in the way of rhythm or pattern in the passage of time. Seasonal change isn't felt by many beyond the countryside, except as variation in the climate. Sunday is increasingly another and more convenient shopping day. But, Christian identity turns so much upon the encounter with God's reality in a narrative, a movement. Each year, the

Church renews its understanding of itself and its world in the process, the story, of the Christian year, with Holy Week and Easter being the wellspring and centre of what we are and what we celebrate. Traditionally, there is a proclamation at the beginning of the Epiphany celebrations announcing the dates of Easter of the year and the various other feasts that follow.

The celebration of Jesus' Baptism as it is narrated in the gospels and depicted in Christian iconography is also an anticipation of his death on the Cross; the heavenly voice proclaimed is an anticipation of the Resurrection. The Church Father John Chrysostom writes: 'Going down into the water and emerging again are the image of the descent into hell and the Resurrection'. In the Orthodox icon of the Baptism, the water is a liquid tomb having the form of a dark cavern. Epiphany and Easter are thus connected. Today, we heard the story from Luke, who throughout his gospel portrays Jesus at prayer; here again he tells us that Jesus was praying while he received Baptism, the going down into the water was a manifestation of Jesus' obeying the will of the Father. He identifies with the sinful state of Israel called to repentance by John the Baptist and invites everyone, reaching out to the marginalized, the outsiders, pushing the boundaries, of who belongs to the people of God. Therefore, here at the Baptism of Christ, we have a manifestation of Jesus' true identity as someone who is at the total disposal of God's will, letting go of his own will.

At Easter, the Christians in Jerusalem normally greet one another with the proclamation, 'Christ is Risen' when they meet each other in the morning and the response is of course, He is Risen indeed. When I was a student in Cambridge, I

greeted people on Easter Sunday once with this proclamation; Christ is risen, I said, to which they replied: 'I know'. In other words, what's the point really? What's the point of all of this? We are the people of the Word made Flesh; we acknowledge as such that our full humanity is achieved when we let go of the assumption that we control our own lives. Our future is not in our own hands. We need to accept that sometimes pain will be part of our lot. This is a very counter-cultural message. We are often told these days that we need to take charge of our lives. We need autonomy freedom and choice. It's not terribly welcome to be told that we need to let go of all of this. But, that is partly what it means to carry our cross. But, that's not all. That's not where the good news lies. The good news lies in the fact that in the Body of Christ to which we are baptized, we carry one another, we don't just carry our crosses. Like Jesus we identify with the suffering of others. We bear one another's burden. We flourish as members of the Body of Christ, not because we are all wonderful, but because other people care and pray for us and may never know what that means in practice.

We also pray for others, like our bishops and archbishops. Just think how much worse it could have been if we had not been praying for them too! So yes, we let go. We can't organize the world as we like it to be. But, in the moment we let go, someone else takes our hands and helps us along. We don't simply sink in despair. In this Body of Christ, the cross we bear is one another. The French philosopher was wrong when he said: 'Hell is other people'. For us Christians, Heaven is other people. That's how the manifestation and the Lordship of Christ are revealed.

It's because of that that we are able, in the words of Isaiah today, to pass through the water, through the fire. It's this faithfulness to one another that helps us grow. We are faithful to God by being faithful to one another. Isaiah spoke of God's passionate love for his people, how God is willing to give everything and everyone to rescue his people from the ends of the earth. In the New Testament, we have that little crucial extra. God is willing to give everything, including his own life and his own glory. He puts himself in our own hands so that He may draw us with his hands to teach us how to carry one another. This is what it is to be baptized in Christ. We are called to carry one another. We are called to be faithful to one another.

This cross of faithfulness maybe carried in dramatic ways, like with the death of Christians facing persecution; think of the Copts in Egypt and others in Iraq and Syria. But, we can also think of undramatic prosaic ways in which we are called to carry one another in this congregation, this diocese and indeed this nation and all that it faces this year with Brexit and other matters. That's our Baptism. We don't do it with a sigh or reluctance or fear. We do it with the knowledge that this is our calling. We need to help one another flourish. At the altar, we will shortly be called to 'behold the Lamb of God' as John Baptist pointed to him. To be the people of the Word made Flesh means to help make a better history, speaking and working for Christ in the multitudes of face to face encounters in which we are his witnesses – to see and to show his glory, the glory as of the Father's only Son, full of grace and truth. Come let us receive him.

Fr Yazid Said