

SERMON FOR THE BAPTISM OF CHRIST

Year A

Sunday 12th January

St James, Louth

Isaiah 42.1-9; Acts 10.34-43; Matthew 3.13-17

+ May I speak in the name of God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

Baptism, we hear in the liturgy, is for us a uniting to the promises of Christ. So why is Christ himself baptised? John cannot understand either. If baptism cleans us of a sin in which Jesus Christ has no part, why does he need to be brought to the water?

In Jesus' baptism, we see the paradox of who Jesus is: totally human as plunges shivering flesh into river water, totally divine as the dove descends and the heavens open. We see that Jesus' pattern of fidelity and obedience, of perfect conformity to the doings of God in his world is not subservient but glorious. This depends our commitment to the church's living tradition, to its sacraments. Jesus' baptism speaks of who he is in a way that will be fulfilled in his death and resurrection. Jesus goes all the way down, even into the dark depths of the water which stand for death and hell, to come up again into the light, resurrected, ascended. He remakes Baptism as he undergoes it, just as he remakes what it is to be human through the incarnation.

Jesus' baptism is key to his revealing as God's son. That is why we have this reading a Epiphany: the season of manifestation.

On this feast of Jesus' Baptism we think too about our own. And seeing Jesus' baptism in the light of his unveiling, helps us to think about ours too as a revealing of who we really are.

I have been with a few people recently approaching baptism, or confirmation of baptismal promises, as an adult. I have heard them use the language of a new start. New, yes, in a way--but for our baptisms it is true what we see of Jesus Christ's, that they unveil and uncover who we really are. Just as we wash a new-born baby for the first time, appreciating the beauty of those little limbs and hands uncovered, perhaps also released, from the memories of anxiety and pain, so God with us.

Baptism is permanent, once for always: but not like something which happens and is gone. Rather it is like a permanently open door, or a permanently broached spring. God's fountain of grace, his cup of blessings, extended to us that we might come *again* and *again*.

This brings me to think about what we mean by 'new' in that language of new start, and of new birth. What a Christian understanding of new might be, as we start a New Year, with perhaps 'new resolutions' and as we together in this family gathering that is our Sunday service repeat together our commitment to the Good News: that God loves us both invisible and infinitely and finitely and visibly, in the flesh and circumstance of our lives; that we desire that Love be our song and our strength...

Baptism, we might think, can't do something new to Jesus because he is so perfectly good and true and already united to God. But it can, and does, unveil that reality to us and *open it for us*. This is a feast of new sight and new light and new being. The sacraments and the whole life of the church we might then see as an amazingly powerful

lens set up to God's purposes in the world. But like a magnifying glass and the sun, those sacraments and what we do here in church do more than magnify: by God's grace they set our lives on fire.

The newness that comes in baptism, in the sacrament, then provides a model for all newness. We're asking for *renewal* and *revealing* always of what is within us and around us in its inherent potential goodness. This means that everything has that potential, that there is nothing and no-one for whom that renewal is not possible--it's a theology for repair, restoration and reconciliation rather than throwing away one thing for another, despairing and rebuying, or expecting that we can change, or things around us change, in a way that is fantastical in its supposed 'newness'.

We should also remember who is really in charge of the new. As our passage from Isaiah tells us: 'and new things I now declare / before they spring forth, I tell you of them'.

All Advent we have been learning to expect and wait and watch. Now it is Epiphany we are learning to wonder and rejoice, but with those lessons of expectancy backing us up.

I don't know whether you have made, or already broken, any New Year's resolutions. I do a lot of thinking on my bicycle, pedal pushing. And I have been thinking about their ethics in the saddle these past few days and how they expect so much of us. *You* resolve and *you* push yourself ... perhaps I had a tailwind at the time, but I thought to myself that is not really a very Christian metaphor.

A favourite poem of mine has these lines near the close:

A strong song tows

us, long earsick.

Blind, we follow

rain slant, spray flick

to fields we do not know.

That is how I feel sometimes. Augustine speaks of the pull, the gravity of God's love. Instead of pushing ourselves this New Year, perhaps we should lift a finger to the wind, and try to discern what direction God is already drawing us.

Again in Isaiah, we have words of reassurance for any partially kept 'new resolutions': 'a bruised reed he will not break, and a dimly burning wick he will not quench'. If we are going to make any resolutions, let's try framing them as prayers from the outset: pray for the grace that we might..., pray for God's strength in... pray that we might be open to God's will for us in this, that or the other. That would be better, I think, than relying on ourselves. And above all I think this New Year, these fresh roaring 20s which in so many ways may decide the future of the human race, is one to remember that, so far, humans pushing themselves to achieve more, be better has not worked out for us very well--it's an attitude which lies behind rampant growth and desire beyond the capacities of our planet and our human society.

So perhaps this is the year to resolve instead to listen for that 'strong song', however earsick we may be. To attend closely to God's word in written book and book of nature, and to hold our finger to the wind, or our eyes to the constellations, to prayerfully discern by what star he is steering us and to what he is drawing us.

And so to find, in ourselves, not some impossible innovation of being, some January sale freshness, a newness that will only disappoint, but that revealing manifestation of our given goodness, that deepest involvement in reconciliation and restoration, that he promises us by his baptism which is the model of ours.

Amen.