

## The Baptism of Christ 2021

It is great to be back with you again after my post-Christmas break and thank you to Fr James and the rest of you who kept the show on the road in my absence. Things have moved fast this past week or so. It looks likely that we are all going to need to stay home as much as possible for a while whilst we get to grips with this more recent strain of the disease. As we come together to worship and meet the Lord through the precious gifts of bread and wine, we should also be mindful and say a prayer for all those who are poorly because of this most recent variant, all those in hospital and for all those who have died.

Let us Pray – Lord at this time of pandemic and lockdown, be with the sick, the lonely, the isolated, the hungry and the dying. Take those who have died into your loving care and help us us as we reflect on how we may be more in-tune with your merciful loving goodness. Amen

We do not yet know what church will look like in the weeks ahead – whether we will be able to worship together still or if everything will have to revert to online streaming again. But I want to remind everyone that whatever happens your church is still here for you: just let me know if there is anyone you feel needs a pastoral call or a bit of spiritual nurture; don't forget the Bring-and-Share Food Bank is here if you run short of emergency food supplies and do contact the Community Hub if you or anyone you know who is isolating needs supplies or practical help. Try not to stockpile too much stuff unnecessarily though.

A friend of mine recently got banned from Tesco's for stockpiling

- ice-cream
- tinned fruit
- and raspberry sauce.

In her defence, she said that she was planning to isolate for a month of sunbaes!

But if only we could be more like ants. They never get poorly, because they have little anti-bodies!

Today we celebrate the Baptism of Christ.

It can seem strange having to think about baptism at a time when baptisms are not allowed due to Covid-19, unless in an emergency. But if there is one thing that we seem to have rediscovered during recent lockdowns, it is a greater awareness and consideration of the natural world. And if there is one common experience that many of us have shared, it is how God speaks to us through the natural world – through living, material and everyday things. And that is exactly what he does through the waters of baptism.

This central truth is the most profound and yet, it seems to me, most overlooked aspect of Christian faith – that God speaks to us through normal everyday things. If we had only paid more attention to it before now, then our world would not be in nearly such a mess – in all kinds of ways. To see God in and through the natural world, would have undoubtedly forced us to care for it better. Imagine how we would feel and act if we had taken more seriously that every living thing around us and each material thing we possess, were all gifts from God to be nurtured and shared – whether our money, our material possessions, or the ecosystem around us - and that doing so were, in fact, the only way for us to thrive.

Whilst for us the magnitude of this realisation seems new and revelatory, it has been a central pillar of Christian faith from the outset. There is a long-held monastic principle that you find in both Franciscan and Benedictine spirituality, put simply - God is present in all things and all things can therefore be a focus for our prayer and a way of interacting with God, if only our attitudes towards them are right. You see both these monastic orders have rules for living that

are designed to encourage the monk, friar or nun to pay attention to the small things, the everyday things we so often take for granted, and to notice the miraculous amidst the mundane. In so doing, they journey with and move closer to God - the God of Heaven and Earth.

We are often quite good at recognising God in the heavenly places, but what about the God in our midst? We must not forget that the God of Heaven is also the God of Earth – that in fact is a huge part of the Christian message. That’s surely the purpose of Jesus, to show us God in our midst.

If you think about it, in the last few weeks we have been celebrating and thinking about a whole number of examples of God speaking through normal earthy things, both material and living. Most directly and obvious, of course, is Jesus being born and laid in the manger. That God should choose to take on human flesh in the form of a tiny vulnerable baby, in order to interact and engage more intimately with us and our situation, is quite remarkable.

But there have been others too:

The Holy Family – a run of the mill young couple with all kinds of troubles. Yet faithful, obedient, persevering, loving. – God speaks constantly through their example and story.

The Manger – the most famous animal feeding trough in the world – but besides sleeping in it, God somehow speaks through it’s earthy, messy, simplicity as well.

The Shepherds – just normal working men being called by God to witness God’s presence in the baby Jesus and spread the word of what they had experienced to other normal folk that they meet on their travels.

The Wise Men, the Star, the Gifts - As we discovered last week, God speaks through each of these in their turn and through them we journey with and move closer to God in the process.

This week we have the Baptism of Jesus . And again, we have God speaking through material things. This time it is through water. The Gospel passage today told of John the Baptist baptising Jesus. John's baptism had been a symbolic act to mark a moment when a person repented on their past and, being true of heart, sought to leave it behind. That moment when they had every good intention of walking more closely with God in the future and obeying His ordinances. But something remarkable happens when John is baptising Jesus which transforms the act for all time.

That God is present in the ceremony is confirmed by Him speaking and confirming Jesus in his divine mission – “You are my Son, the beloved; with you I am well pleased”. But something happens just before that that is just as profound – the Spirit descending like a dove upon him. From this moment forward the ritual washing of baptism takes on a whole new emphasis. It becomes the one-off initiation for all future followers of Jesus. A moment when a person leaves their old life behind and seeks the new, more natural way of walking with God. And God has spoken and continues to speak to countless Christians through this simple sacrament based in this everyday material substance that we so often take for granted – water.

I suppose you could describe baptism as spiritual cleansing through the symbolic act of washing. But even that doesn't quite cut it, since it encourages us to forget the basic normality and everydayness of what is at its centre. Water is the bedrock of life. Without it no living thing can survive. But through Baptism God uses it to return us to a more natural kind of life too.

From the beginning of creation, we were designed to walk with God in our midst. That's what the Garden or Eden is all about. At the fall, when Adam and Eve eat the forbidden fruit, things go wrong and they lose their way. The same is true for us, the paths we so often follow lead us away from God – they make us selfish, self-centred,

mean and unkind – but that is not how we were designed to be. That is not our natural state. In Baptism we are born again, as it were, out of our spiritual death into new life lived in the Spirit – the same Spirit that was breathed into all living organisms at the beginning of creation. And so, we begin walking more intimately with God once again. But it is difficult to keep on the right path – in the world that we have developed to live in, life is just so difficult and complicated. Inevitably we make a wrong turn now and again. How often, I wonder, when we feel distanced from God does that coincide with us failing to appreciate him in the everyday material things around us: People, resources, objects, art, the natural world?

But it is not always easy to keep the focus and childlike awe and wonder necessary to recognise God in world around us. We also need something a little more obvious, intentional and frequent if we are to keep our spiritual sight clear.

There is a reason why Jesus gave us the Eucharist as our ongoing way to encounter him. “I am the Bread of Life” he says. “Those who come to me will never be hungry”. At Holy Communion, we join billions of other Christians the world over recognising Jesus in the breaking of bread, where we meet him, and he feeds us with spiritual food to revive our souls. As we remind ourselves that God is truly close to us in and through these material gifts of bread and wine – produce of the earth herself - we have an opportunity to start over. Every time we meet Jesus in the breaking of bread, we get given an opportunity to reorientate our inner beings and address our attitudes and actions.

And, of course, there are many other ways that we feel intimately close to God through everyday material things – oils used for anointing, the laying on of hands, exchanging of rings and the tying of the knot, the paschal candle of Easter, a simple candle lit with a prayer, talking to the birds recognising the spiritual bond you share ...

It is in the simplest, everyday things that we recognise God in our midst, if we are willing look. Amen