

Sunday 12th January 2025; The Baptism of Christ. Benefice Holy Communion, Gilling,

Some words from our Old Testament from Isaiah reading this morning, *“Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are mine. When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you; when you walk through fire you shall not be burned, and the flame shall not consume you. For I am the Lord your God, the Holy One of Israel, your Savior. Because you are precious in my sight, and honoured, and I love you...”*

I often recite these words of comfort and hope to people who are experiencing illness, grief, or end of life hopefully to bring a sense of peace and assurance of God’s unchanging love for them. The words also refer to baptism and God’s presence with us at baptism and thereafter, especially during times of difficulty. The passage stresses that despite my baptism I have, like every one of you, suffered sorrows and losses of life, encountered difficulties and struggles, had to face the changes and chances of life I would rather have avoided. Baptism speaks a deep truth because it marks that assurance from God that our existence, identity, and value are not limited to time and space; to the things we have done or left undone, more than just biological existence, but that each of us is eternally loved. Baptism is the acknowledgement of the gift of that Love.

But baptism does not eliminate our difficulties, fix our problems, take away the pain, or change the circumstances of our lives, but instead it changes us and offers a way through those difficulties, sorrows, problems, and circumstances and ultimately, a way through death. Baptism transcends our biological existence and offers us a vision of life as it might be and offers us a new way of being – one that is neither limited by nor suffers from our

“createdness.” Through baptism we no longer live according to the laws of nature but by a relationship with God, who through the Prophet Isaiah says, “Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are mine”. That means when we pass through the waters of sorrow and difficulty God is with us. The rivers that can drown will not overwhelm us. That means when we walk through the fire of loss and ruination we are not burned. The flames that can destroy will not consume us. For he is the Lord our God, the Holy one of Israel, our Savior, who loves us. To know this, trust this, experience this is the gift baptism brings and baptism always takes place at the border of life as it is and life as it might be. In the Gospel today that border is the river Jordan, where John is baptizing. Geographically, symbolically, and theologically the Jordan River is the border on which baptism happens. It is the border between the wilderness and the promised land; the border between life as survival and a life that is thriving; between sin and forgiveness; between the womb and the tomb; between death and eternal life. We all stand on that border at every moment in our lives. Some of you stand there now maybe experiencing that border as a place of loss, fear, pain. For others it is a place of joy, hope, and healing. It is both at the same time. The only reason we can stand at the border of baptism is because Jesus stood there first. We stand on the very same border on which his baptism took place.

When Jesus had been baptized and was praying, the heaven was opened, and the Holy Spirit descended upon him in bodily form like a dove, and a voice came from heaven, “You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.” The same applies to us at our baptism and each time we revisit it. God says to each of us, ‘you are my beloved.’ Jesus’ baptism is for us and for our salvation. His baptism makes ours possible. The water of baptism does not need to sanctify Jesus but instead, he sanctifies the water for our baptism. The water that once drowned now

gives life. Sacramentally and ritually, we are baptized only once, yet throughout our life we return to the waters of baptism. Daily we return through living our baptismal vows and at other times the circumstances of life, things done and left undone by us and others, the ups and downs of living, send us back to the waters of baptism. Then we return to again be immersed into Heaven, with Christ, to be bathed by God's breath, the Holy Spirit, and to let the name "beloved" wash over us too, renew and transform us and live out the promise of the new life it brings every day, called by God named by Him, and be precious, honoured and loved without measure.

Thanks be to God. Amen.