

Sunday 10th January - First Sunday of Epiphany - Baptised into the Father's Love  
1 John 4.7-16; Luke 3.15-17,21-22

I am continuing with our preaching programme for the period up to Easter, "Re-igniting our passion – that Jesus may be known, in our hearts, in our church and in our world." The theme this week "Baptised into the Father's love" parallels this morning's Gospel reading concerning the Baptism of Jesus. So this is a simple two point sermon, point one Love and point two Baptism, I will be quoting from scripture a fair bit today so you may want to grab a bible or take a note of the passages.

Let me begin with point one, the Fathers' Love and look at the first reading this morning from 1 John 4. In this passage there are some clues to the nature of the Fathers' Love. "... love is from God ....for God is love ....This is love, not that we loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins." God is Love, he loves us and affirmed this love by sending his son to be a sacrifice for us. Paul in his letter to the Romans put it this way Romans 5.8 "God proves his love for us in that while we still were sinners Christ died for us."

The Father's Love then is this that God loves us even if we don't love him, he loves, that is his nature; Jew, Gentile, Christian, Muslim, Animist, Atheist, Agnostic, God loves all and that love is proven in that before we loved God, Christ died for us. The love we have from God is a pure, forgiving, self-sacrificing love. As Roland said in his Sermon last week "No one has ever seen God" However, the passage from 1 John 4 v 12 goes further "No one has ever seen God; if we love one another, God lives in us, and his love is perfected in us." God's love is perfected in US, in ME? God's love is perfected in US.

How can that be, how does God live in us, again from 1 John 4 v 13 "By this we know that we abide in him and he in us, because he has given us of his Spirit." The Father's love is perfected in us by the Holy Spirit, whom Jesus spoke of to his disciples at the last supper, John 14.15-17 "If you love me, you will keep my commandments. And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Advocate, to be with you for ever. This is the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees him nor knows him. You know him, because he abides with you, and he will be in you." This still does not answer the question how can this come about, how can we receive the Holy Spirit.

In Acts 8 Luke relates an interesting event, 14-17, "Now when the apostles at Jerusalem heard that Samaria had accepted the word of God, they sent Peter and John to them. The two went down and prayed for them that they might receive the Holy Spirit (for as yet the Spirit had not come upon any of them; they had only been baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus). Then Peter and John laid their hands on them, and they received the Holy Spirit."

Acts 10 tells us about Peter and his encounter with Cornelius, a centurion and other Gentiles whom Luke tells us "feared God with all his household; he gave alms generously to the people and prayed constantly to God." At the denouement of the story Peter says, Acts 10.34 "Then Peter began to speak to them: 'I truly understand that God shows no partiality, but in every nation anyone who worships and adores God and does what is right is acceptable to him.'" Luke's account continues at verse 44 "While Peter was still speaking, the Holy Spirit fell upon all who heard the word. The circumcised believers who had come with Peter were astounded that the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out even on the Gentiles, for they heard them speaking in tongues and extolling God. Then Peter said, 'Can anyone withhold the water for baptizing these people who have received the Holy Spirit just as we have?' So he ordered them to be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ." These two accounts tell us that if you are baptised you should receive the Holy Spirit and if you have received the Holy Spirit you should be baptised, whether Jew or Gentile.

This brings me to point two, Baptism, what is Baptism? It is a word that we use to refer to a sacrament of the Church and we find reference to baptism in the New Testament, but what does it mean, where does the word come from? If you will allow I would like to quote from Roland's book, Finding the Way through Water, Chapter 33; "The verb 'to baptise' is derived from the Greek word which originally meant 'to drench' or 'to drown', and was also the word for a sinking ship. There are therefore the notions of being swallowed up, of being cut off from life, of dying, or being transformed through being immersed in some form of liquid. The act of immersion is physical, during which the initiate experiences the actual physical death by being immersed in the water. Alternatively, the physical act may be symbolic of a much more profound and spiritual or psychological transition, in which consequently, what baptism

conveys is the sense of a radical transition from one state to another; the transition for the initiate can be as dramatic as physical or spiritual death.”

John the Baptist, there is a clue in the name, was baptising by the river Jordan when Jesus came to him. The Gospel reading this morning ends with 3.21 “Now when all the people were baptized, and when Jesus also had been baptized and was praying, the heaven was opened, and the Holy Spirit descended upon Jesus in bodily form like a dove. And a voice came from heaven, ‘You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.’”

We are not the only ones who struggle to understand, Nicodemus, a Pharisee a leader of the Jews came to Jesus to try to understand John 3.3-8 “Jesus answered him, ‘Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above.’ Nicodemus said to him, ‘How can anyone be born after having grown old? Can one enter a second time into the mother’s womb and be born?’ “Jesus answered, ‘Very truly, I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit. What is born of the flesh is flesh, and what is born of the Spirit is spirit. Do not be astonished that I said to you, “You must be born from above.” The wind blows where it chooses, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit.’ Do not be astonished You must be born from above.

Thorough Baptism then we are reborn, our old self is dead, we are now born of the Spirit. Our old self is dead, so lie down, or as Paul so eloquently put it in Romans.

Romans 8.9-17 “But you are not in the flesh; you are in the Spirit, since the Spirit of God dwells in you. Anyone who does not have the Spirit of Christ does not belong to him. But if Christ is in you, though the body is dead because of sin, the Spirit is life because of righteousness. If the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, he who raised Christ from the dead will give life to your mortal bodies also through his Spirit that dwells in you. So then, brothers and sisters, we are debtors, not to the flesh, to live according to the flesh— for if you live according to the flesh, you will die; but if by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body, you will live. For all who are led by the Spirit of God are children of God. For you did not receive a spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received a spirit of adoption. When we cry, ‘Abba! Father!’ it is that very Spirit bearing witness with our spirit that we are children of God, and if children, then heirs, heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ—if, in fact, we suffer with him so that we may also be glorified with him.”

Christ is the full expression of the Father’s love, 1 John 4.10 “This is love, not that we loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins.” So how do we respond to this Baptism, being Baptised into the Father’s love. Again let me quote Paul from Romans 8.

Romans 8.31-39 “What then are we to say about these things? If God is for us, who is against us? He who did not withhold his own Son, but gave him up for all of us, will he not with him also give us everything else? Who will bring any charge against God’s elect? It is God who justifies. Who is to condemn? It is Christ Jesus, who died, yes, who was raised, who is at the right hand of God, who indeed intercedes for us. Who will separate us from the love of Christ? Will hardship, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.”

1 John 4 16 “So we have known and believe the love that God has for us. God is love, and those who abide in love abide in God, and God abides in them.” We are Baptised in the Love of the Father and we are commanded by Jesus at the end of Matthew’s Gospel to respond to the Father’s love in this way 28.19 “Jesus came to the Disciples and said to them, Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.” Amen

David