



Sermon: - 8th January 2017

When you walk through the waters....

Isaiah 42: 1-9; Acts 10: 34-43; Matthew 3: 13-17

Now that it's 2017, and the New Year is a whole week old, and things are pretty much back to normal, I wonder if any of you have made any New Year resolutions? If you need any help I've got a list of the top 10:

- Spend more time with the family.
- Take more exercise - get fit.
- Lose weight.
- Give up smoking (again).
- Get out of dept.
- Learn a new skill, take up a new hobby.
- Put something into the community -help others.
- Get organized. Or buy shares in companies selling electronic planners!
- Become more security conscious.
- Give up drinking, at least for the first week of January!

Would anyone like to confess to making New Year resolutions this year? What are they? How long do yours normally last? It's always good in the beginning, isn't it? We start off the New Year full of good intentions.

I wonder if you are like the two women overheard chatting? One says "What are New Year's Resolutions" The other responds, "Well it's like a "to do" list for the first week in January!"

We start off the New Year in a fit of enthusiasm and everything looks hopeful and bright and fresh and new and of course we are going to keep our resolutions this year! We have a brand-new start and this time it's going to work! We are going to be disciplined, we are going to be organised, we are going to be efficient, and we are going to transform ourselves.

And in a way this is what it was like in Genesis, as the Spirit of God hovered over the chaos of darkness and night, and brought light and order into the world. The writer of Genesis takes this story of the dualistic battle between light and dark, the battle between chaos and order, and creates a new story of a creation without conflict, a creation which is the work of the one God and one in which everything that has been created is good. And God saw that everything was good. But then, just as at New Year, so in Genesis, we go and spoil it all, our resolutions fail, our self-discipline crumbles, we take this wonderful new world and make a mess of it.

But God doesn't give up on us. God never gives up on us! A bruised reed he will not break and a dimly burning wick he will not quench.

Fast forward hundreds of millennia and the baptism of Jesus heralds in a new age. John is a prophetic figure, speaking God's words to the people, and he tells the people that his baptism is only a preparation. There is one to come, one who is more important, and whose baptism will be a baptism with the Holy Spirit. So it makes sense that, immediately after Jesus is baptised, the Spirit descends on him and he hears the voice of God in affirmation and delight, "you are my beloved son".

This is a dramatic incident. Who is this man? What is happening here? What does it all mean?

If we were to make a film of the drama this icon would be like a still from that film; it encapsulates all the elements of the performance in one atmospheric illustration.

There is Jesus, in the middle of the waters of the Jordan. Not bright, smoothly flowing waters, as we might imagine, but dark, turbulent waters, and all those little figures in the water representing the world as it is in all its chaos. The artist is conveying that this is a significant moment but there are negative omens. Straight white lines shoot down from the heavens, encircle a dove, and then fall on Jesus. The white, divine light, the Spirit of God, centres our gaze on Jesus; our eye is drawn to him. This is meant to indicate that this is a highly significant moment and God is in action. And so we wait with bated breath to see how the story unfolds, what happens next...

John's baptism is a baptism of repentance, a ritual washing away of the old life in preparation for the new life which God has promised, when the Messiah comes on the 'Day of the Lord'. Not all that different from our attempts to change ourselves through New Year resolutions.

But when Jesus walks through the waters of baptism it gives baptism a new meaning. It is no longer just about saying sorry and turning to God. It is no longer about waiting for God to fulfil his promises in some future time. Instead, for us as Christians, it has become the moment which marks not just turning to God and a shedding of the old life but also being filled with his Spirit for a new life of discipleship and ministry. It is a moment when we are identified with Jesus, baptised into him, walking through the waters of cleansing, walking into the waters of commitment, out into the kingdom. John's baptism pointed forward to the coming of the Kingdom which Isaiah described, the coming Messiah. The Baptism of Jesus was a sign that the Kingdom had at last come, the Messiah had come, as Peter described, God anointed Jesus with the Holy Spirit and power, and he went around doing good and healing all who asked, because God was with him. And when we are baptised into Jesus we are baptised into this Kingdom.

The hovering Spirit of God at the first creation is echoed in the spirit of God descending on Jesus after his baptism. In the Baptism of Jesus the presence of the spirit reveals that he is the first of a new creation. Just as the first creation is 'good' so the voice from heaven, as Isaiah recounted, declares to the Son 'with you I am well pleased'. Once again God delights in his work. Once again God is pleased, pleased with his son, and we hear his voice echo across the water as Jesus rises from the waves. He is pleased with Jesus. And he is pleased with us! This baptism of Jesus, which declares a fresh start, is not just a new ministry for Jesus, it is a fresh start for us all, the point where God's goodwill towards human kind takes on a new focus in the life and ministry of Jesus. The point where the peace of God can begin to become real, the point at which the kingdom has come...

In this icon, in an echo of the creation narrative, we see the Spirit hovering over the dark waters... and God's new creation in the midst of those nightmarish depths. There is Jesus, "a light shining in the darkness" (Jn.1:4); the one through whom and in whom all things exist— he is there, in the darkness, and he is not overwhelmed. This is the new creation, the salvation of God entering into all our fears, present in the chaos. "Emmanuel, God with us."

Somewhere in this mess, in these turbulent and chaotic waters, God is working his purpose out. His spirit brought order out of Chaos in the beginning and God saw that it was good. His Spirit descended on Jesus at his Baptism; God saw that it was good and called Jesus his beloved. And the Spirit of God remained with Jesus throughout the next three years, throughout his journey to... and through... the cross! Once again the Spirit

brought order out of chaos. Through the mess of Christ's pain and passion, God was working the great mystery of our redemption, and once again he saw that it was good. Through the waters of baptism, through the chaos of this disordered world, God is with us and waiting for us to turn to him.

God's spirit brings order and new life and purpose and hope into this disordered world and out of the sometimes disordered lives we lay before him. This is more than simply repentance, and much, much more than simply our well-intentioned but ultimately doomed New Year resolutions, this is God offering himself by his spirit to work in us, transform us, and bring order out of chaos even in our lives.

What would it be like to hear those words from God, "You are my beloved child and I am pleased and delighted in you." Isn't that what we long for? And that is what Jesus baptism means to us. When we are baptised, we are baptised into Jesus and when God looks on us, he sees his beloved child. Now that doesn't mean that we don't still sometimes mess it up, of course we do, we get it wrong, we hurt other people, we hurt God, we make mistakes, and sometimes we deliberately and stubbornly go our own way rather than God's way. We are human, we are fallible; we are not perfect. But in and through it all, God is looking at us through Jesus and working out his purposes for us, for the church and for the world. When chaos reigns in our lives, God's spirit is waiting to bring order. When confusion seems to be all around us, God's spirit is waiting to bring peace. It will take some time, it will take a lifetime, but his Spirit is working in us for our good and the good of the world, and the sign and seal of that Spirit in us is our baptism, just as the sign and seal of the Spirit in Jesus was his baptism.

In the beginning, when the Spirit moved on the waters God saw that it was good. When the Spirit descended on Jesus, God not only saw that it was good, but called Jesus his beloved Son. In the same way, through our baptism into Jesus, God does not just see that it is good, he calls us beloved too.

He redeems us, in Jesus, through the Spirit, so that in the long run, at the end, when we stand before him on that final day he will say to us, "You are my beloved child and I am pleased and delighted in you."