

Isaiah 43:1-7

Psalm 29

Acts 8:14-17

Luke 3:15-17,21-22

I have called you by name...

It is five years since David Hicks was captured and taken to Guantanamo Bay. As we watch the continuing saga about him in the media, and witness his steady withdrawal and decline, it is hard to imagine the impact on him that any news of release would bring. Can you imagine his ears hearing his name called as one who was to be set free? David Hicks' story is like a grand narrative of our times. As it plays itself out, we can only hope it will not have an even sadder conclusion. Because of where we are placed as a congregation, we know other stories of captivity. And we know of release, new beginnings and amazing second chances at life. And as we watch the events of history unfold we can, at times, discern the changes that are on their way.

The reading from Isaiah is an amazing announcement, directed to a remnant of Israel who has been in exile. To people, locked in despair, loss, and humiliation, the prophet declares a change has taken place and a new day is dawning. They are being set free to return home to their land and their life: *Do not fear, I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are mine.* To be named by another established a close and special relationship between the namer and the named. And now, God announced that Israel's name, which he had given them, had not been forgotten. God was at work in the movements of history, honouring the original YES spoken through Abraham and Moses. This insignificant, miserable band of uprooted men and women are now assured that precisely they are precious in God's sight, they have been named and are honoured and loved. Now God has turned towards them to gather them together, to recreate them and restore them to their place. The God who keeps faith in this way, who honours promises, stays true to the character of his name, and acts for all to see. This is what God is like. If we have never had to struggle for life and freedom it may be hard for us to capture the wonder, the liberation of this announcement. The tangible sign of the divine promise, alive in the world was to be Israel's freedom. And this was something God wanted all people to share.

Luke's particular contribution to the Baptism of Jesus is to make it a sign of a new beginning. He makes it clear that John is not the holy one of God. It is for Jesus the heavens opened, the Spirit came, and that the heavenly voice is heard. He is the one long expected. As in Isaiah, there is a naming: Jesus is claimed by God as the Beloved Son. God is at work here in a special way. Luke sees John as the last of the old-world of the prophets. What Jesus brings will be new and different, and will be determinative for the world. At Ascension we celebrate that one of us is with God. At the Baptism of Jesus we celebrate that God's one is with us. In the waters of Baptism he stood with us and entered fully into the world of chaos and darkness that we know. But the chaos and darkness do not rule. God's voice was heard over the water. The chaos has no power over God. And God's voice over the water it is a sign that our exile is over. There is no

longer anything that can separate us from God. For God has come among us to apply renovating love, that we may have fullness of life.

As we pause to remember Jesus' Baptism, and to Baptise Bahram, who also has known long and difficult journeys and exile, it is good to recall we are the people of the water, with its potential for chaos, and for life. And it is good to remember that God's voice was heard over the water. When Jesus' is named the Beloved Son at his Baptism, it is because God wills that all people should be beloved children of God. In this sacrament we enact and declare that Bahram, and all of us, have been brought into the new beginning given by God. This is the hope and strength in which we live. This makes hope and new life possible. And we pray that it will be so for all who are in exile or otherwise oppressed.