

**Isaiah 42:1-9**

**Psalm 29**

**Acts 10:34-43**

**Matthew 3:13-17**

**Theme ‘And a voice from heaven said,**

**“This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased”.’ (Matt 3:17)**

**Sermon by Chris Mostert**

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[A] Introduction

Jesus comes to John to be baptised. John’s whole ministry, message and baptism constitute ‘an eschatological sacrament of repentance’, as it has been called. This is no mere rite of initiation into a community. This is different from all ritual washing. There is an urgency about John’s preaching and a finality about his baptism.

It is for this baptism that Jesus presents himself. We don’t really know why. We can make a few guesses, but it would be beside the point. More to the point would be to notice what the Gospel-writer makes of this event. It goes without saying that it is foundational for the ministry of Jesus, by way of the wilderness and its testing of Jesus.

More important still, Matthew makes it a disclosure-event, an epiphany-event: an event (in other words) in which Jesus’ true identity is revealed. It is an event at which the heavens were opened and the Spirit descended on him; and a voice from heaven said, ‘This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased’; words that find their echo in another epiphany-event, the transfiguration of Jesus on the mountain.

At the beginning of the story it is made clear who this Jesus is. He is no mere prophet sent from God. He is the Son of the Father, who loves him and who confirms him as Son. He receives the Spirit from the Father. As our passage from the book of Acts puts it, ‘God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and with power’ (10:38).

[B] The water of baptism and the waters of calamity

We cannot think of Jesus’ baptism at the hands of John without thinking of that other event, his death at the hands of Pilate, which Jesus also alluded to as his baptism. ‘Can you be baptised with the baptism with which I am baptised?’, he asked his disciples. ‘Can you drink the cup which I must drink?’

Baptism is associated with death, with drenching and drowning. Every act of Christian baptism, no matter how beautiful, is first of all a baptism into death – the death of Christ – before it is then also a baptism into his resurrection life. The very word ‘baptism’ suggests something overwhelming, something calamitous. Baptism is never just a washing; it is a drowning.

This year we celebrate the baptism of Jesus in the wake of unparalleled death in and by water. Every time we see that gigantic wave, inundating everything before it, the sickening feeling in the stomach returns. To see the pictures, hear the interviews or contemplate the magnitude of this disaster brings tears to the eyes of almost everyone. Water gives life; and it delivers death—this time on a devastating scale. The people of Israel feared the sea and – as in today’s psalm – found comfort in the assurance that

God's voice thunders over mighty waters; that God sits enthroned over the flood.

For most Christians it is not that easy – especially at a time like this – to see God in control of it all. ‘Fountain of living water,/ drink for the thirsty,/’ writes Dorothy Lee in a new poem [reproduced at the end of this sermon], ‘rainfall on barren wasteland,/ source of all bliss and spring-time./ But now, it turns out,/ also the source of a single crack in the carcass of the world,/ lifting the billowing seas,/ and a wave more dreadful/ than Noah’s—/’

God is ‘not a puppet-master in regard either to human actions or to the processes of the world,’ Rowan Williams wrote in an article published by *The Age* this last week. ‘So there is something odd about expecting that God will constantly step in if things are getting dangerous. How dangerous do they have to be? How many deaths would be acceptable?’

But we who believe in God and trust in God cannot (and should not) suppress our questions about how an event of this kind relates to God's purpose and power. For what do we trust God?—that God will make the world totally safe for us, especially for us?

We cannot, as believers in God, say that this event has nothing to do with God, and God has nothing to do with it. That would make us no different from atheists. Neither dare we say – if Jesus shapes our view of God at all – that God has visited this disaster on the world as a warning or as a punishment—as some have been quick to say! And neither can we come up with a complicated explanation—those of us who cannot help thinking about such things—and think the problem is solved! That would be gross self-deception and a travesty of our faith and our life in Christ.

[C] Uncaring universe or caring God

Not every question that we could ask about this calamitous event can be answered, certainly not in a simple, straightforward way. That doesn't mean that we should not think about the hard questions, but there is a time and place for that. Making sense of a great disaster, Rowan Williams wrote, does not mean coming up with the best explanatory theory. It also means facing the wretchedness of it and facing our sense of helplessness. And of course it means doing something about it—if only writing a decent cheque.

In letters and articles this week, some have suggested that we should have known that we live in an uncaring universe, and in a world in which human beings are not privileged by protection from disasters. For Christians, the issue is not that we live in an uncaring universe, but that we live in relation to a caring God, a God who so loved the world that he sent the Son into it to redeem it. We have just celebrated Christmas, the feast of the Incarnation, and been reminded again that there is a light, the light of all people, which has come into the world; this light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it (Jn 1:4-5).

Is there something in the baptism of Jesus, this very same light of the world, which speaks to us in the darkness of this tragedy, in the loss, the grief and the bewilderment?

In a very under-stated way, this story speaks of God as the Holy Trinity: the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. In the baptism of Jesus, we see an action of the Father. The Father anoints the Son; identifies Jesus as the Son, the Beloved. What the Son will do has the blessing of the Father.

Very tellingly, the heavens are opened. An open heaven is a promise of salvation, the converse of a heaven that is closed, which is the sign of the affliction and forsakenness

of humankind and the desolation of the earth. God is not remote from it all. When Dorothy Lee asks, 'From your high window/ far above the vehement seas,/ did you ever once look out/ to behold the insolent breach/ of your boundaries?', the answer has to be Yes!

More than this! The Son enters the waters: the waters of chaos and destruction, the waters of an untamed nature and of human treachery and disregard. What goes on in this world is not a matter of indifference to God. Uncaring the universe may be; but uncaring and remote from it God is not! Just as in his death after crucifixion Jesus descends to the place of the dead, so in his baptism he stands in solidarity with those whom death touches and destruction sweeps aside.

And the Spirit is part of it, the Spirit sent by the Father and received by the Son; the Spirit who strengthens Jesus for all that he does and endures, who is the power of God, the vital energy in everything that lives, the saving, prophetic power of God. The Spirit of God is in the world to repair and restore and remake, to set free and make new.

[D] The trinitarian shape of God's involvement in the world

The baptism of Jesus gives us a hint about the nature of God's involvement in the world. Again, the grammar of our speech about it is trinitarian. We have to speak about the Father, the Son and the Spirit.

We have to do, of course, with the Father, the 'creator of all things', as we say in the Creed. Whatever happens to shake us, we cannot surrender the conviction that the world, far from being its own cause, is the creation of God. When it looks as if God has fallen asleep – or closed the doors and windows of heaven – this is an illusion. The world – both its physical structure and the diverse cultures that have been shaped from its raw materials and the creativity of the human mind – is the work of God's hands, which the Psalmist assures us, God will never abandon (Ps 138:8).

In the Son God enters fully, intimately into the human situation and experiences it 'from the inside', as it were. This is the mystery of the incarnation, and it is expressed in the experience of baptism, where Jesus stands in solidarity with all who are overwhelmed and scattered, destroyed or dismayed by the power of the elements or by the hatred and selfishness of human beings. Only on this basis can we say – what the ancient Greeks could never have said – that God experiences the pain of the world as God's own; just as a parent feels the pain of a child, or one person feels the pain of a partner or friend.

But it would not be enough to speak of the suffering of God, or of God's solidarity with all who are affected by this tragedy. God is not an onlooker, even a compassionate onlooker. The Spirit is the agent of the world's transformation, its healing, its final perfection. As long ago as the prophet Isaiah, God has promised new things, even a new heaven and a new earth. And so, because of God's promise, and because of the ceaseless work of the Holy Spirit in the whole creation, we live in hope of a better world, physically, morally and spiritually, a world free of disaster, whether natural or engineered by people against others. This is why we pray continually for peace and justice, for reconciliation and renewal. We do so not as a piece of wishful thinking, but because it has its ground in the promise of God and the unending work of the Spirit in the world.

We will not quickly move on from this shocking event—even we, most of whose lives are not directly touched by the resulting tragedy. We move on not by trying to forget, but by facing the fear and confronting the questions.

We who know God through Jesus Christ will move on because we will affirm that this remains God's world, that God has entered into the depths of the human experience with us, and that God continues – fire and wind and water notwithstanding – to re-make and re-shape this world and set it free from its pain.

Thanks be to God.

LEVIATHAN, by Dorothy Lee

It's harder than ever

to believe in you.

Fountain of living water,

drink for the thirsty,

morning dew

on leaves of summer flowers,

rainfall on barren wasteland,

tinkling streams across the hidden valleys:

source of all bliss and spring-time.

Yet now, it turns out,

also the source

of a single crack in the carcass of the world,

lifting the billowing seas,

and a wave more dreadful

than Noah's—

but no ark,

no ark to lift them

singly or in pairs to safety;

no rescue for the mother

torn from her children,

no river riven for the dead to cross,

nought for the harmless babe

but a floating tomb on an angry surge.

From your high window

far above the vehement seas,

did you ever once look out

to behold the insolent breach

of your boundaries?

3rd January 2005