

IS BAPTISM JUST A SOCIAL RITUAL OR A PROFOUND MYSTERY?

(Sale-Sunday 8th January 2023 – Baptism of Christ – Matthew 3:13-17)

Today is the first Sunday after the Festival of Epiphany which was last Friday. Epiphany celebrates the Arrival of the Wise Men to honour the baby Jesus. In most of the traditional Orthodox Churches, Epiphany is the time they celebrate Christmas, and we have no doubt heard what I think is the supreme hypocrisy of the Patriarch of the Russian Orthodox Church blessing the outrageous war by Russia on the Ukraine and yet calling for a cease fire for the Russian Orthodox Christmas even when they were very happy for Putin to continue bombing during the Western Christmas and New Year the week or so before.

In our Anglican Calendar this Sunday is called The Baptism of Jesus Our Lord. The first important event recorded of Jesus' adult life was to be baptized by his cousin John the Baptist who was then the most popular living prophetic voice in Israel. Jesus' baptism is a story not only of the symbolic and ritual baptism of Jesus but also of the revealing of who Jesus really is. As Jesus arises from the waters of the river Jordan after his baptism, the voice of God from heaven is heard to declare "This is my Son the Beloved, listen to him." This story is not only about Jesus and about John the Baptist, but it is also about who we are called to be. This story reveals to us that we can have no way of truly knowing Jesus in the deep interior spiritual sense without God's revelation to us about exactly who Jesus is. We can't find out who the risen Lord is, in his divine power and glory, just by doing historical research or by reading countless theological books about him, though of course all this is very helpful in our spiritual journey. However, we can't build and anchor our faith in Jesus into our hearts and souls just by intellectual means. But, to really begin to know who Jesus is and what he eternally means, such knowledge must come to us through God's opening of the inner ears of our souls to that reality. It comes to us as a gift and as a grace. The fraught question often asked is why it is easier for some to believe and have faith, and why it is much harder for others, and why for some it is seemingly impossible. The answer is a deep mystery and linked in a profound way to our own individual response to God's grace. Often, I believe, it can be our own ego and personal sense of self-satisfaction and of self-createdness about our personal skills and abilities that gets in the way of being open to the inner reality of God's grace. (Joke about the precocious young daughter at a special dinner for a famous man....)

As people of faith, we believe that none of us is in fact self-made – we are all created by God for a purpose and each created with innate skills and abilities to develop. Some of us may be more intelligent, more entrepreneurial, more intrinsically gifted at certain things than others are, but this is not a reason for self-arrogance. It should be, instead, an impetus for giving thanks to God for any of our innate giftedness. God’s grace never forces itself upon us, but gently urges us to accept the profound mystery of life and the apparent arbitrariness of the way God gives various gifts to each of us to use and develop. One of the first steps in faith growth is really understanding that I am no better than anyone else. I may perhaps have a higher IQ or a greater artistic or musical talent or an athletic ability, but I could just as easily have been born differently with a mental or physical handicap, or been born in a poverty stricken or war-torn country. And all of us, I am sure, can think of people we know that have transcended life’s difficulties and hurdles of birth and life to become the most inspiring and empowering of people. (Just look at our Australian of the year for 2022 the extraordinary wheelchair bound tennis player Dylan Alcott). We each have been blessed with life and with whatever innate gifts God has given us to live our life well and with dignity. Whether we use our talents or not is basically up to our willingness to recognize and respond to these gifts, and hopefully to allow God’s grace inside us to develop them. In baptism, we publicly and intentionally invite God’s grace to pour down upon the one being baptized just as it did upon Jesus. It is then up to God and to that person what the future unveiling and enabling of their innate gifts will be.

It may perhaps surprise some of you to hear me say this, but I don’t believe I am ultimately a good preacher and priest. Why do I say that? Well, I have been ordained a priest now nearly 44 years and indeed a lot of people over the years have responded positively and been thankful for my ministry and sermons. Yet if I was truly a great preacher then parishioners would always be enthused and inspired to care and share the gospel with friends and family and our pews should hopefully be full every Sunday. Every priest must accept his or her own humanness. All clergy are working within their own limitations, and indeed within each one of their congregation’s frailties and imperfections. My sermons may often have been helpful and somehow touched people’s souls, but the reality is, they don’t always do that. Why? Because in each of us, every Sunday, there are so many obstacles to positive hearing, such as tiredness, or minds distracted by other things, or doubts, or hurts, or skepticism. The effectiveness of a sermon is equally

limited by my own ability to prepare it properly, and then to present it powerfully and effectively and this is affected by my varying levels of openness to God and my own emotional and spiritual peace.

Often people have come to me after a service to say that a sermon has been helpful or challenging or enlightening, and I am heartened and delighted by that. But, in reality, it was God's grace in YOU that enabled that response, and it was hopefully my openness to God that facilitated that sharing of God's message. Now it is up to you and to God to enable any revealing and meaning in the sermon to have some positive influence in your life.

A clergy friend of mine recently went on 4 months Long Service Leave and so he spent many weeks listening to different sermons in different churches by different clergy, both men and women, across Australia. He remarked to me "You know it has to be a miracle of God's grace that anybody has faith and goes to Church!" He was not always impressed with the clergy and the sermons he heard. But you see he is basically right! It is a miracle! It is a miracle that God calls and uses us clergy to speak out of our ordinary and sometimes faltering humanity. Belief and faith are miracles of grace, and so is the enabling of the Holy Spirit's action in our lives to somehow empower and transform us, whether our lives, at the time, are peaceful and happy, or perhaps stressful or dislocated or traumatized. We all need access to God's grace and openness to God through prayer, and through Bible reading, and sermons, and through the very important channels of community sharing and worship.

Did you know you can order a Visa card with Jesus' face on it! This is in the USA of course! Imagine taking from your wallet your Jesus Visa Card and having Jesus watching over your every purchase! The US website to order such a card says "Show the world your love for Jesus the Most High". Apparently, the idea is to evangelize people – presumably the supermarket checkout people and other tradespeople - by using your credit card and taking the opportunity to share your faith. All I can see is supermarket queue "rage" as checkouts slow to a standstill while salespeople are browbeaten by effervescent Christians!

A professor friend of mine once bought me home from the US this “Buddy Christ” From the back of the box it reads “He is your own personal portable Saviour! Place him on your car dashboard, your computer console, or anywhere else you may be tempted by sin or plagued with self-doubt.”

I also have here a cake of “Jesus Soap” On the back of the box it says “Been a little naughty lately? Don’t worry, Jesus soap is here to wash away your sins. This blessed bar of soap makes washing yourself a pure delight, gently cleansing your soul with soft clouds of soap suds. Each swipe of soap is like a warm hug from Jesus himself. Leave the shower guilt-free and smelling like heaven”

In the US, (of course!), you can even get ‘Drive through Communion’ at a Sunday ‘take away’ church!

To me all this is outrageous commercial gimmickry that positively dishonours and disempowers the grace of the Holy Spirit in our lives. In the end, Jesus can only be known in the deepest recesses of our hearts and souls as we are willing to spend quality time in prayer and reflection with God. God’s grace is always freely available when we do this. We need to trust that the sometimes ‘scary’ subjectivity of faith is something worth pursuing and having. Faith is not the absolute assurance of things known and fully understood, but faith is a relationship experienced and a grace expected to help us through each day in all our times of need and challenge. The Christian Church is called to baptize people, and especially children, into the wonderful promise of relationship with God in Jesus Christ. Everybody here, like Jesus at his own baptism, requires God’s voice to speak into and to be somehow heard and to break open that mystical space between the dimensions of heaven and earth so that we can find our way into knowing the love and purpose of God for us.

I have experienced many times that mystical and very personal revelation of knowing God’s intangible voice speaking into the deepest places of my awareness, and of feeling Gods’ gentle spirit like a dove breaking open my spiritual shell so I can hear and experience what is often be just a tiny mustard seed of God’s infinite purpose for my life and being. But each time it is precious and enough! It implodes into my being with peace and warmth and faith because I trust and know it can. In and through baptism, we are all given the grace to be more open to experiencing

that promise. The key is to live trusting in that spiritual reality. Let us all live expectantly in that hope. Baptism is indeed a powerful mystery not just a social ritual.