

*Sermon for 16 January 2022*

*St Andrew's, Newgate Street, Newcastle upon Tyne, Diocese of Newcastle*

**Epiphany 1 (Baptism of Christ): Isaiah 43.1-7, Luke 3.15-17, 21-22**

*May my words and the meditation of our hearts be acceptable to the Lord our strength and our redeemer. Amen.*

Imagine yourself, if you could for a moment in ancient Israel, possibly about 600 years before the time of Christ. You are all gathered as ordinary members of your village or urban community, then God's prophet speaks after a long silence:

"Thus says the LORD,  
he who created you, O Jacob, he who formed you, O Israel:  
Do not fear, for I have redeemed you;  
I have called you by name, you are mine." (Isaiah 43.1)

What are you to make of what you hear? You know your history. You were supposedly God's chosen people and there had been several occasions when you had gone astray. You have been subjected to slavery, poverty, poor leadership, economic and political corruption within your ranks, bad management, and latterly overrun by a superior foreign power.

Jerusalem had fallen! And now, you are in exile, you feel hopeless in a foreign land. Yet God's servant is saying to you: God's deliverance is approaching ... fear not! Can you really trust what he's saying? Is there any hope?

So, in Isaiah 43, we have:

- Part of the universal message of salvation, and hope
- most of all, a message of comfort to those beginning to return from exile
- the nightmare is nearly over. The Israelites have suffered enough under the long Babylonian captivity. From the east, the west, the north and the south, God's people will be gathered
- Context: the enduring theme within this major section of the book of Isaiah (chapters 40-55) is the return from exile and restoration of hope for Israel, beginning with that well-known verse:

"Comfort, comfort my people, says your God. Speak tenderly to Jerusalem and declare to her that her term of service is over, that her iniquity has been pardoned, that she has received from the LORD's hand double for all her sins." (40.1)

**Israel will emerge from this tragedy; the old must pass away, the new will come.**

But, amid that prophetic message lies a reminder (perhaps, a timely message for us in the third year of the pandemic): two almost identical parts to this short prophetic saying:

"Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are mine." (43.1)

"Do not fear, for I am with you ... everyone who is called by my name, whom I created for my glory, whom I formed and made." (43.5a, 7)

**It is a timely reminder: God has redeemed / delivered what God had created (one of the central messages of the book of Isaiah – the God of deliverance/salvation is also the God of creation).**

**It's a special relationship: God as father of his family**

- High cost of the deliverance is implied (ref. geopolitics of that time?); “I give Egypt as your ransom, Ethiopia and Seba in exchange for you ... I give people in return for you, nations in exchange for your life.” (43.3b, 4b)
- There is renewed hope, there is a new future! There is a restoration of one's identity – for the Hebrew people/Israelites, individually and as a nation.

“When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you; when you walk through fire you shall not be burned, and the flame shall not consume you.” (43.2)

I don't wish to be glib or to offer any cheap remarks, but what's been our experience of walking through fire?

- Austere decade since 2010, made worse by the pandemic
- Neighbourhoods and communities surviving on foodbanks and the goodwill of unsung volunteers
- Will I still have my job if I'm not fully vaccinated?
- Church facing the onslaught of decreasing members, depleted finances, within the context increasing secularism?
- Or, are we battling any old guilt, mental turmoil, a deeply hurt memory, battling a chronic illness, bearing another person's burden, and the loss of self, identity, and livelihood?
- Not to mention the countless international situations that are so dire beyond our imagination and control!

As we experience our 'Baptism of water and of fire', implicitly there ought to be repentance; and now we, the people of God must move on with a renewed identity.

**Luke 3:15-17, 21-22** New Revised Standard Version, Anglicised

<sup>15</sup> As the people were filled with expectation, and all were questioning in their hearts concerning John, whether he might be the Messiah, <sup>16</sup> John answered all of them by saying, 'I baptize you with water; but one who is more powerful than I is coming; I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. <sup>17</sup> His winnowing-fork is in his hand, to clear his threshing-floor and to gather the wheat into his granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire.'

<sup>21</sup> Now when all the people were baptized, and when Jesus also had been baptized and was praying, the heaven was opened, <sup>22</sup> and the Holy Spirit descended upon him in bodily form like a dove. And a voice came from heaven, 'You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.'

That's how we are to think about the Baptism of Christ and what it means for each of us:

- 'Baptism of Christ': essentially Jesus fully identifying with all of humanity in their movement towards God
- that Jesus who had no sins of his own to confess, but was willing to come alongside us who are the transgressors
- identifying with and empowering us in our repentance, in our turning away from sin (Hebrew concept/ *metanoia*); ref. the main thrust of John the Baptist's message

Just as God affirms Jesus' divinity at his baptism 'You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.' and affirms the very costly path that he must take, likewise we are called into the new community of God's people embracing all the joy and pain in our journeys of faith.

*Eternal Father, who at the baptism of Jesus revealed him to be your Son, anointing him with the Holy Spirit: grant to us, who are born again by water and the Spirit, that we may be faithful to our calling as your adopted children; through Jesus Christ your Son our Lord, who is alive and reigns with you, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever.*

*Amen.*