

A Sermon by Canon Maggie Guite

Epiphany 1/Baptism of Christ Year C 13/1/19

Isaiah 43.1-7 Luke 3.15-17, 21-22 (Linton 8 am)

A moment of clarity in the confusion of our lives.

I've had a pretty confusing week, personally speaking – and I think we can all agree that we live in confusing times. I'm not just talking about the political situation. There are so many things which have changed around us in society in a relatively short space of time which challenge us – we don't necessarily know what to think; or we may have decided, and even have intentionally changed our views in response to new realities ...but we find that our feelings don't always change so fast. Questions about what's right, what's wrong; who people really are, what we can hope for the future - it's all a shifting scene. I'm sure you can each think of things which feel confusing to you in the world around, and in human relationships – perhaps your most important relationships. Now, maybe I'm talking like this because as I get older I find that I have less definite views about things, there are more shades of grey – and I'm led to believe that that's not an uncommon feature of ageing.

When I was a student, the branch of theology I specialised in was called 'systematic theology' – really a study of Christian doctrines, and how one doctrine entailed another, and so forth. But I remember that at the *viva voce* exam for my PhD, one of the examiners asserted very strongly that there can be no such thing as a complete

system of Christian belief. The thing's impossible. And I see that more and more now. We can't catch God in the box of our logic, nor can we smooth the lumps and bumps, the paradoxes of Scripture out into a clear system; it's a mistake to try and do it, and leads to rigid thinking and a lopsided faith.

I know that lots of people find the Bible confusing, and perhaps particularly the Old Testament. I won't pretend to try and take the difficulties away: I feel them myself. Why, for example, in the passage of Isaiah we had for our first reading which is so full of a sense of God as creator of all, and of his ardent love – why does that ardent love for Israel expressed in words like '*Do not fear for o I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are mine*' (v.1) lead to the thought that God could '*give Egypt as a ransom, Ethiopia and Sheba in exchange for you*' (v. 3): how can the loving God, creator of all nations, in a passage of surpassing beauty, show such favouritism? There's plenty in the later chapters of Isaiah which poses the question even more sharply – passages which seem to drive towards stating the universal love of God, and his intention that all nations should worship him in Jerusalem, and then fall back into particularism and exclusivism. There are explanations which give an account of all this – which show some sort of pattern in the Scriptures – but they never wholly solve the mystery, or smooth out all the difficulties.

What I think we have to hold on to in our faith, and in our lives, are those luminous moments when something becomes clear – not necessarily on the level of thinking,

but deep in our hearts, in our inner awareness of *what really matters*.

Our Gospel reading was about one such luminous moment – the baptism of Jesus. It was a moment for Jesus in which his identity was fully opened up to him, the affirmation his Father’s great love for him, and his given purpose; the moment of his anointing with the Spirit. It didn’t take away all questions and inner turmoil for him; he still had more to work out about how his ministry should go, as the story of the testing in the wilderness shows. There’s also reason to believe that, humanly speaking, he went on learning throughout his ministry about the scope of his mission and significance – particularly in his encounters with Gentiles who showed more faith in him than some of the Jews did; an old system of thought was broken open through experience and the Spirit.

For John the Baptist, if he did indeed witness the light and the voice (as St John’s Gospel asserts – the other Gospels are less clear about this), the Baptism of Jesus would also have been a luminous moment; a moment of profound recognition (prefigured in that time, when as a child in the womb, John had recognised the Christ in Mary’s womb, and leapt for joy). But there continued to be much to confuse; for John’s own message had been of the one who came with a winnowing fork and with fire among his people, and yet it didn’t obviously turn out like that. The baptism in the Holy Spirit which John had prophesied turned out not to be a moment of fear, but rather of joy – though of course, John didn’t live till that first Pentecostal experience to witness it. But there was enough dissonance

to confuse him, even before he died, for him to send from prison to ask if Jesus was *really* the one for whom they’d been waiting.

If, like me, you find that life is quite confusing – both your own life, and that of society around you; if old certainties and simplicities of faith have begun to wobble in the face of experience, let the Baptism of Christ be an invitation to you – not to construct some new system, some new structure of thought and belief which you hope will remain watertight, but rather, to come back again and again to a person – the mysterious person of Jesus. When we find we need to map our way through disturbing and difficult scriptures, come back to him both in reading about him in the Gospels, and through praying to his living presence. Let him surprise you, but also prove himself as a compass to find your way forward. Keep revising your idea of him – an idea you may have had since Sunday School – against the reality you find in the Gospel. Don’t let yourself fall in the trap of making him in your own image, or in the image of some type or system of Christianity you feel comfortable with. I say it again – let him surprise you, and be who he is.

Above all, let him stand before you as the one to whom the Father says, ‘*You are my Son, the Beloved – with you I am well pleased*’ (v 22). – and let him share that love with you. For, when we ourselves were baptised, we weren’t baptised into a system of belief, or an ideology which shapes our every thought with an unquestionable coherence: we were baptised *into Christ*, to share his life, to be one with him; to face life alongside him, enfolded in the same Spirit and loved by the same Father.

The baptism of Christ was, and can remain for us, a luminous moment in the midst of the many things which whirl around to confuse us. It's the subject of many icons in the Eastern Christian tradition – and an icon in this, its original sense, is a window into the depth of reality, an awareness of what really matters, to be grasped more by the heart than by the heart than by the head.