

11 January 2015

Preacher: Leslie Griffiths

Hymns: 182 “On Jordan’s bank the Baptist’s cry”
 159 “Not far beyond the sea nor high”
 369 “Baptise us with your Spirit”
 82 “O Lord, my God, when I in awesome wonder”

Readings: Mark 1:4-11
 Acts 19:1-7

“The Baptism of Jesus”

It’s That Man Again! That was the name of a war-time radio broadcast which fed my dearly beloved and late friend Peter Baugh with some of his best jokes. ITMA, it was fondly called, and it came to my mind this week because of the appearance of John the Baptist in this morning’s readings. It’s only four weeks since he had a whole Sunday to himself (the third Sunday of Advent). Now, here he is again, playing second fiddle to the man he really wants us to know better – namely Jesus of Nazareth. John will pop up again in the summer when, on his Feast Day, we’ll think about his gory death.

In both of our readings this morning, there’s reference to baptism or, to be more precise, to two baptisms. And I want to look at them this morning and to compare one with the other.

Let’s start with the baptism of John – called a ‘baptism of repentance’.

The Greek word for repentance is *metanoia*, means quite simply ‘seeing things differently’, or ‘changing one’s mind’, or ‘turning around’. It refers to the way we sometimes wake up to the horror of our actions, the weaknesses in our character, and make a New Year’s resolution to turn our back on such a way of life. We are appalled by what we do and the way we present ourselves and those feelings of revulsion drive us to a change of lifestyle.

As it happens, there’s been reference to this understanding of repentance in two major stories that have been running through our newspapers this week.

First of all there’s the case of Ched Evans – a convicted rapist who, now released from prison, is completing his sentence in the community. He’s a professional footballer of some ability but nobody now seems able to employ him. Why not? Because he has shown no remorse, no contrition, no recognition of the dreadful act that he’s committed. He would be a poor role model in a field of endeavour that is desperately short of such people.

There was a clear absence of remorse from those who committed the atrocities in Paris this week. Indeed, they seemed so proud of what they had done. Indiscriminate killing of civilians, a commitment to violence, a lack of fear of death –

all these were part of the attitude displayed by the murders of Paris. No remorse, no repentance.

These are two current stories. They can be matched, of course, by many others that we can think of across the previous few months. It leads me to wonder whether we have bred a generation and created a culture that has lost its moral compass. It has led me to feel that the old debate between morality and immorality is now a thing of the past. Amoralism is where things are – people have no sense of the difference between right and wrong, no benchmark against which to measure their actions, nothing to induce a turning away from wrong deeds. Repentance, if I'm right, may be yesterday's word.

There is a theological danger at the heart of this understanding of repentance. It might lead us to believe that somehow an act of penitence needs to happen *before* grace or forgiveness or reconciliation can flow. That is, it turns penitence into a 'work' that can earn the reward or blessing of forgiveness. That would be very dangerous indeed. And we must question it a little later in this sermon.

Seeing what is wrong and reacting to it, changing one's stance towards what one now regrets, turning away from wrong doing (or, in conventional theological jargon 'sin'), has importance. But it doesn't say everything about the nature or full range of meaning that we can tease out of the word metanoia.

In the scriptures, the baptism of John the Baptist is contrasted with the baptism of Jesus, a baptism which is described as 'baptism in the Spirit'. It's clear that this represents a significant step beyond everything we've looked at thus far. And we must now turn our attention to it.

I suppose we better get the word 'spirit' sorted out first. I suspect that, as the 'Third Person in the Trinity', it's fed some wayward thinking. It has anthropomorphised the word, turned it into a human shape with human attributes. It's as if it were some kind of cloud on legs, a wind on skis, an energy with a human shape. Some pretty exaggerated understandings of the word spirit lie behind some of the excessive attributes of Christian teaching and experience.

To get us on a right track, it may be important to bring up a few sayings from common parlance. When someone shows courage, or plays a game according to the rules, or seems to get things right, we hear ourselves say to him/her 'that's the spirit'. When we feel that Christmas is bedevilled by commercialism, obscured by a lot of kitsch and Victorian activities, we hear ourselves yearning for 'the Christmas spirit'. And, a final example, lawyers will be searching to apply not only the letter of the law, but its spirit too. Indeed, there's nothing more edifying than hearing two lawyers quibble about a law with each claiming to the other that his interpretation better represents the spirit of the law in question.

The use of the word spirit in these examples reveals that we are talking about something which is of the 'essence' of a person's character or an activity. It's what makes someone true to him/herself. It's the 'me below the mask I wear', my deepest self. It's what God sees in my heart of hearts when I'm closeted in my private space.

And if all of that's true of the meaning of the word spirit as it applies to us human beings, we may rest assured that it also applies to God. It is that which is of God's deepest self, it is the ground of God's being, it is that without which there is nothing of God.

So, for this morning's exercise we must present 'the Spirit of Jesus' as all that reveals the deepest aspects of Jesus' being. It expresses itself in the fact that he loves us – totally, preveniently, unconditionally.

Look around the walls of Wesley's Chapel and you'll see our baptismal roll certificates in profusion. We have conducted some 300 baptisms here during my ministry. And I don't think that I shall ever grow dull of Spirit as, holding the child or the person to be baptised in my arms, I say the following words:

For you Christ came into the world. *For you* he lived and showed God's love, suffered and died... triumphed over death. *For you* he prays. *All this before you could know anything of it.* In your baptism the word of Scripture is fulfilled: 'we love because *he first loved us.*'

This is the perfect answer to those who think we should wait until we can (or our child can) answer for ourselves. Baptism shows God revealing his essential self, his unqualified love, his true Spirit. He doesn't wait for us to be old enough or wise enough or good enough. We are embraced by a love that will not let us go and we can discover that love through the symbolism of baptism.

In this service of baptism, the questions that we put to parents and Godparents and the congregation come after the baptism not before it, they are not a condition that has to be met before we can proceed. God's love is accessible to us and we declare that fact gloriously in the act of baptism.

I heard just this morning of a priest who, in a Eucharistic service, pronounced God's forgiveness *before* he invited the congregation to confess their sins. A confession of sin is not a necessary precondition for receiving forgiveness. Sometimes it can be an understanding that we are forgiven in God's inscrutable and generous love that is the only things that could possibly wring a confession from us, a recognition of our sinfulness.

In the parable of the Prodigal Son, there were two instances of metanoia. There was the one which came when the boy recognised that he must go home. But this was a metanoia of survival, an instinctual recognition of a need for grace. The second (and deeper) level of metanoia was revealed by the way his father received him. It was the love of that parent, the overflowing tenderness and compassion, which evoked the repentance (in its deeper sense) from the boy.

We've been awash with the slogan 'Je suis Charlie' in the aftermath of the atrocities that have taken place in Paris. I have been overwhelmed with feeling for the Muslim policeman who was so brutally killed by the Muslim gunman. I read a tweet on the BBC website. It went as follows:

Je suis Ahmed. I am not Charlie. I am Ahmed – the dead cop. Charlie ridiculed my faith and culture and I died defending his right to do so.

What could be deeper or more moving than that? And it is the readiness of that man to put his life on the line that is an indicator of the kind of love we see in God. Indeed, when I saw the words 'Je suis Ahmed', at first sight the words 'Je suis' (with no gap between them) looked just like the word 'Jesus'. And the tweet might have read I am Jesus: I am not Charlie. I am very like Ahmed. I died at the hands of others too. People laughed at me and said that my whole life was foolish and that I had displayed real weakness. But I want you to know that I died in order to help people understand the real nature of love, love which I want everybody to be washed by and warmed by and changed by.

Now that's worth thinking about isn't it?