

January 8, 2017, All Saints, 8am.

Baptism of Jesus

(Isaiah 42:1-9, Ps.29, Acts 10:34-43, Matthew 3:13-17)

God's Loving Upside-down View

As a child you may have enjoyed looking at people from an upside down position, perhaps when hanging by your legs from a tree! People looked different. Some pictures, and even maps of the world can look quite different when turned upside down and Australia and New Zealand are at the top!

Our first introduction to God, might have been as an all-seeing judge who knew what we did in secret and would punish us for any wrong doing. Although knowing better, we might have drifted into adulthood with a vague picture at the back of our minds of God sitting somewhere on a cloud ready to condemn us. But is this a true picture of God?

This morning we had readings giving differing views of God and God's relationship with us. We heard about a strong and powerful God with images of a wind breaking trees, flashing fire and a King seated above floods; but also of a merciful and compassionate God. In Isaiah a righteous God is revealed as a Suffering Servant, exercising justice not through violence and loud condemnation, but by gently caring for the bruised, protecting and encouraging a flame barely alight, helping the blind to see and bringing freedom to prisoners of darkness and despair. Justice is shown as a gradual process taking place until the reign of God is established on the earth.

The image of the Suffering Servant can be applied not only to Israel in Isaiah's time, Jesus as Messiah, but also to ourselves. As followers of Jesus, collectively as the body of Christ and as individuals, the Spirit of God that empowered Jesus, guides and enables us in our faltering efforts to be a light to the nations and to offer God's hope to all we meet.

Such a description of our Christian identity is confirmed when Cornelius, a centurion (a Gentile but a God-fearing man) obeyed a dream and sent for Peter to come and speak to him, his relatives and friends in Caesarea. Peter told the gathering how Jesus, anointed with the power of the Holy Spirit, preached peace, healed people, was crucified and rose from the dead. Further, everyone who believed in him received forgiveness of sins through his name. At this point the Spirit of God fell on all present. Water was then brought and they were baptised in the name of Jesus Christ. This story makes clear that the Spirit of God and the

work of revealing God's love in the world was not to be restricted to Jews, it was for all people who became disciples of Jesus—including Gentiles, and us.

The baptism at Caesarea, leads us to today's gospel account of Jesus' baptism by John the Baptist in the river Jordan. John recognised Jesus as God's anointed one and protested that for him to baptise Jesus was wrong, it was upside-down! But Jesus, assured him that all was well. After his baptism, Jesus emerged from the water, the heavens opened and the Spirit of God, like a dove, descended on him.

Matthew here depicts God symbolically bringing to birth a new creation by linking Jesus' baptism to Genesis 1 when God brought creation out of the watery formless void. The dove is a sign of the Spirit of God or wind of God, moving over the waters—(like a bird hovering.) Jesus received the Spirit at his baptism, the same Spirit had entered him at his conception, for his ministry. What a powerful moment! But this was not all. A voice was heard from God, "This is my Son, the beloved, with whom I am well pleased."

What has this event and these amazing words to say to us who are followers of Jesus today? We have been baptised, possibly as babies, when we too received the Holy Spirit for ministry, and became children of God and members of Christ's Body.

God called Jesus, "the beloved". The Greek word translated as *beloved*, also means, *dear*, and *worthy of love*. Did God identify us in the same way at *our* baptism? Dare we even suggest it? What difference can such an identification make to how we behave? Are our lives turned upside-down because we have been baptised?

In the 1662 Book of Common Prayer, some of you will remember the words used at the beginning of the services of Morning and Evening Prayer. First are some verses of Scripture. Then the whole congregation is addressed by the priest or leader of the service, not as, "You sinners and spoilers of God's world", but as, "Dearly beloved ...". He or she is not deluded into thinking we are people we are not. He or she knows full well, being one of us, that we are sinners. It is obvious in the words that follow: "The Scripture moveth us in sundry places to acknowledge and confess our manifold sins and wickedness; and that we should not dissemble (conceal), nor cloke (hide) them before the face of Almighty God".

We might think of “Dearly beloved” as just an old fashioned quaint expression never used these days. But, what if it means what it says for each one of us, and all God’s created world and universe?

Paul, in his letters, called the Christians gathered in Rome, and some individuals such as the woman, Persis, as ‘God’s beloved’. Even when reprimanding the Christians in Corinth, Paul still called them ‘beloved’. In both the Prayer Book and in Paul’s epistles, ‘beloved’ is used to address ordinary people like you and me, the church, who sometimes act with love and care, but at other times hurt others and do things of which we are later ashamed. How can such a phrase as “beloved of God” truly describe us? Surely there is some mistake. If it is true, what does it mean for the way we view ourselves, other people and creation?

When we were baptised we became sons and daughters of God; one with Christ as members of his body, beloved of God. We received the power of the Holy Spirit to guide us in our work as Christians, revealing the love of God in our everyday life, by loving God and our neighbour with our whole selves. It can be hard to believe that even when we sin we are still God’s beloved, called to confess our wrong doings, receive forgiveness and the strength of the Holy Spirit to continue to work to bring the reign of God on earth. Yet this seems to be the truth.

As people who are ‘dearly beloved of God’, and follows of Jesus, we are called to see others also as ‘beloved of God’, others who like us sometimes show God’s love to others and at other times do not. This may mean that at times we are to regard others who do not seem to deserve it in an upside-down illogical loving way, like God regards us. When we work at seeing others as beloved people, we can no longer hold them in a state of being sinners, despised and rejected. We free them and ourselves to begin a new relationship of love. We find ourselves starting to show them compassion and forgiveness instead of criticism and rejection. This attitude can alter how we speak to or about members of our family, our neighbours, those we meet casually and even the political leaders in our world we see on TV. We may begin to view an irritating or demanding neighbour, people in the church with whom we disagree, those who have hurt us and even Donald Trump in a new or upside-down way.

To bring about such a change is not easy and takes time. Sometimes we quickly sum up people to whom we are not attracted and imprison them permanently in labelled boxes. Just as it can be hard to see ourselves from God’s loving upside-down perspective, so we find it hard to change from glancing at others from our usual sensible place, or one influenced

by our past hurts, to looking at them as loved by God.

We can be helped to view things from God's loving place by turning to the gospels. In John 8 we are told of the woman caught in adultery and brought to Jesus for condemnation. In the end those who accused her departed and Jesus told her, "neither do I condemn you". Jesus also accepted and respected, children (Mark 10:13), the blind beggar Bartimaeus (Mark 10:46) and Zacchaeus the chief tax-collector who climbed up a tree, when his disciples and others saw these people only as interruptions to be ignored or dismissed. Even when hurrying to heal the daughter of Jairus a leader in the synagogue, Jesus stopped to speak to a woman who had been ill for 12 years and had drawn healing from him with her touch (Mark 5:25).

You might be thinking by now that all this is too idealistic, so let me be more realistic. Remember the first disciples, they were not perfect. They argued among themselves about who was the most important, wanted to destroy the Samaritans who did not welcome Jesus (Luke 9:53), and deserted their leader when he was captured (Matt 26:56). At times Jesus was frustrated, disappointed, and even critical of his friends, others he met who might have followed him and those opposing him, yet he kept on loving them, treating them as 'beloved of God'.

As Christians we know that the God we love, whose Spirit gives us life and whose love was revealed by Jesus, is not a remote God who sits on a cloud ready to condemn and reject us. The basic truth of our lives is that we are all, together and as individuals, fundamentally loved and known by God as 'dearly beloved', however hard such an 'upside-down view' might be for us to accept about ourselves, and to accept of others. As baptised members of Christ's body we are called to reveal this truth of being God's beloved by forgiving, serving, encouraging and respecting one another. This is also the way we are to behave towards all people, because all are made by God in God's image, and all are dearly beloved of God. Finally, the same attitude is also to be extended to encompass all of God's loved creation of which we are a part.

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