

The Baptism of the Lord - 2017

We here at St Philip's are undergoing one of those inevitable periods of change! A new Rector has arrived and everyone's watching what might happen. What's he going to do next! The fact is of course that whatever concerns you might have, they are nothing compared with the changes Susan I are making!! When was the last time you queued up at the Motor registry and tried to convince the person at the counter that you really do live in the Rectory, although you can't prove it! Many churches have bells, and at services of induction the new Rector is asked to ring the bell. The number of tolls is an indication of how long they will stay in the parish. One ring, one year! We haven't got a bell, but I do now have an ACT Drivers Licence it expires in 2021!! I am sure that many of you have sussed me out already. But let me say that whatever I do, whatever direction we go in, it will be consistent with Anglican polity and tradition. I believe that our doctrines provide us with more than enough room in which to explore, discover and learn; orthodox Christian faith is a very large space indeed.

Cardinal Newman was for many years an Anglican Priest but eventually was to discover that for him Roman Catholicism was the only way forward. In 1864 he wrote *Apologia pro Vita sua* it was a response to a criticism of him by the novelist Charles Kingsley, who questioned his integrity on his move to Rome. It was perhaps inevitable that he should move in that direction. In the Apologia he wrote *'From the age of fifteen, dogma has been the fundamental principal of my religion: I know no other religion; I cannot enter into the idea of any other sort of religion; religion as a mere sentiment, is to me a dream and a mockery.'* Newman went on to create a thesis known as the 'Development of Doctrine.' It became one of the founding ideas of the Second Vatican Council in the 1960s, a council with far reaching ramifications; it profoundly influenced Western Christianity, 'us.'

I don't think however you would call Newman 'dogmatic' in the pejorative sense. He was not a liberal but believed that all sound development could be found inherent within dogma, there was no need to go outside.

On Good Friday, many churches, and I am sure that St Philip's has been one of them, commemorate by contemplating the seven last words. They are the seven pronouncements of Jesus from the cross, they are very familiar to us, forgive them Father, for they know not what they do, it is finished, elio elio lema sabachthani etc; there are many books written on the last words. But what we considering today are the *first* recorded words of Jesus, because they are just as significant as his last. Mark has Jesus saying 'The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news.' This is perhaps the statement par excellence which gives the rationale for the Gospel tradition. In Jesus, God has come near, open your eyes reorient yourself, literally turn and believe this good news. In Luke Jesus' first words in public are those from Isaiah: 'The Spirit of the

Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor...’ They are words which sum up Luke’s emphasis, Jesus is one of whom Isaiah spoke, he is to stand in solidarity with those society had left behind. John is different he says everything in his prologue, that’s another story.

And so we come to Matthew and these most important, yet rather confusing words. When John balks at baptising Jesus he responds ‘Let it be so now; for it is proper for us in this way to fulfil all righteousness.’ He stands in solidarity with sinful humankind becomes one with us, As St Paul wrote in second letter of Corinthians in those extraordinary words ‘he became sin.’ Cardinal Newman once wrote that ‘the only real sign of life, is change.’ As I have suggested he thought there is nothing really new, but that progression, development is already there, it requires new contexts and understanding to bring things to the fore. Matthew’s Jesus is like this; ‘let it be so now...’ Jesus’ ministry in Matthew is one of movement, of change, re alignment, opening up. It is already there inherent in Jesus but for the time being things will follow the established course; ‘let it be so now...’ Jesus’ ministry must be lived out within Israel and in accordance with all righteousness – within the law, he did not come to do away with the law and the prophets but to fulfil them. But Jesus’ life opens a new horizon of meaning. He speaks in the context of John’s warning of the coming wrath of God; to be righteous is to keep the law. But Jesus speaks of the redeeming righteousness that comes as a gift; God’s righteousness, God’s will, God’s plan, is the gift of salvation, the very core message of the gospel, the good news. Later in the gospel he warns the newly selected twelve not to go to the Gentiles or the Samaritans, but there comes a time when things will change. We experience that change in one particular event when Jesus meets the Canaanite woman who asks for healing. ‘I was sent to the lost sheep of the House of Israel,’ but she argues ‘even the dogs eat the scraps that fall from the masters table’ and Jesus heals her daughter. Remember too those lovely words ‘Come to me *all* who are heavy laden.’ This movement picks up momentum and reaches its climax at the commission right at the end of the gospel when Jesus tells his followers to ‘go and make disciples of *all* nations.’

So if you are concerned about change, remember that it is inherent in our tradition, I believe it is crucial, inevitable, it is perhaps the only sign that we are alive! Ours is a ‘movement’ and it is a movement that must always be looking away from ourselves, it must spill out of this place...but I also believe that it should be consistent with our doctrines and that provides us with wonderful opportunities to explore, celebrate and share this faith that we hold dear. Amen.