

Baptism of our Lord 2021

A French film director, whose name I am not going to attempt to pronounce for fear of ridicule once wrote to a friend: I've always had the impressions that real militants are like cleaners, doing a thankless, daily but necessary job. In years past the intercessions, as we now know them, would have been introduced with the words: 'Let us pray for the whole state of Christ's Church militant here in earth.' Anglican congregations are not known for their militancy! They are not words we use today and whilst I understand why on one level, on another I wonder if we have lost something.

A part of my misspent youth involved listening to rock music at ear splitting volume, which living in a terrace house no doubt enraged the neighbours as well as my parents! One particular band which I enjoyed was 'Iron Maiden' – nothing to do with the then UK Prime Minister, some of you may have heard of them. I managed to see them live on two occasions, which probably explains my deafness! In 1983 they released a song called 'Revelations' which began, surprisingly with these words:

O God of earth and altar,
Bow down and hear our cry,
Our earthly rulers falter,
Our people drift and die;
The walls of gold entomb us,
The swords of scorn divide,
Take not thy thunder from us,
But take away our pride.

This is the first verse of a hymn by GK Chesterton the English writer, philosopher, lay theologian, and literary and art critic. It doesn't appear in our hymn book, but the tune which usually accompanies it – 'Kings Lynn' does. It is a traditional English folk tune melody arranged by Ralph Vaughan Williams, we'll hear it today as our recessional. Iron Maiden used the words and the tune and reworked them into a Heavy Metal anthem! I think Chesterton would have been quite amused (though I'm not sure about Vaughan Williams), indeed in one place he wrote:

I remember a debate in which I had praised militant music in ritual, and some one asked me if I could imagine Christ walking down the street before a brass band. I said I could imagine it with the greatest ease; for Christ definitely approved a natural noisiness at a great moment.

Why do I mention this today? There are two reasons, the first is because on occasions I often find it difficult, as St Paul puts it, to pray as I ought. The Prayer Book doesn't always seem to help and I find myself praying using the words of others, usually in poetry and hymnody. This week in particular the second verse of Chesterton's hymn became my prayer:

From all that terror teaches,
From lies of tongue and pen,

From all the easy speeches
That comfort cruel men,
For sale and profanation
Of honour and the sword,
From sleep and from damnation,
Deliver us, good Lord.

Chesterton is echoing the Litany of the Book of Common Prayer, but importantly he is also giving voice to what many of us perhaps were thinking as we watched chaos unfold in Washington this past week. I felt a sort of teenage militancy stirring within, Iron Maiden helped!

The second reason is that today we celebrate the Baptism of our Lord, today is a 'Theophany,' in the midst of chaos. Today Jesus comes to be baptised, he comes as it were, to take his place at the head of our Brass Band, there is *militant music in ritual*. Today is a Revelation of God, who once again brings order to the chaos of the deep as we heard in Genesis.

We rarely see baptism today, which is a shame and I often wonder how I can speak about this ancient ritual in such a way that has an impact that makes sense today? Some folk tell me that they would rather leave it up to their children to make their own decisions about religion when they are old enough, as if baptism was some sort of imposition that they might later wish to be rid of. To bring a child to baptism is no imposition it is an act of love, it is act of perfecting. It is a sacrament of renewal, of resurrection, of new creation; and it is brought about by an extraordinary act of obedience which does away with the chaos of the ancient disobedience of Genesis. In submitting to John's baptism Jesus, through his obedience, turns John's baptism of repentance into a baptism of the Spirit. This is Jesus' baptism of fire! This is what Christian baptism is about in all its fullness, this is what Paul was about on his arrival in Ephesus; it is about the bestowal of the Spirit. It is militant movement against sleep and damnation, without it we drift and die. Our bringing of children is an act of militancy, of defiance. Some may say we baptise children because it's our culture, but this is no longer the case. Baptism is counter cultural, it is stand against the chaos that all too often we find threatening us. Christ definitely does approve a natural noisiness at great moments. It is our baptismal calling, to speak, to proclaim and worship into and against chaos. In the baptism of Jesus heaven is opened God and humanity reconciled... it stays open through the Church militant, its worship and sacraments, its prayer and ministry; a seemingly thankless, daily but necessary job. And long may there be militant music in ritual!

Today through Jesus' obedience God becomes one with us. As Bishop Lancelot Andrewes the great Anglican preacher of the 1600s said: 'in his baptism he puts us on; as we put him on in ours,' God in Christ descends into the watery chaos in solidarity with us. This is where all the baptised are to be found bringing form and shape, meaning and purpose, justice and peace, love and hope in what is seemingly chaotic, this is what being 'truly human' means in our Creed. It is a protest movement humbly bringing militancy and defiance, countering those who seek chaos. This is where God and true humanity meet and this is where the Spirit moves; this is new creation. Amen.