

*This is my Son, the Beloved*

St Philip's Anglican Church, O'Connor

Rev'd Rebecca Newland

Last Sunday after the Epiphany—The Transfiguration of Our Lord—2 March 2014

*Exodus 24.12-18; Psalm 2; 2 Peter 1.16-21; Matthew 17.1-9*

Today is a very special day for Riya and indeed for us. Riya has asked to be baptised and to part of this church and the faith of Christ. It is special because it is part of Riya's journey of belonging and of finding a way in life that will help her as she grows into a woman. Riya's parents have done their very best to honour what is happening for Riya. Riya comes to us from what one could call a very post-modern background. She is one of the new generation of people born into a multicultural, multi-faith, diverse, global village world. She has a beautiful history from both her parents and she will bring all that with her through her life. All of us are made up of that wonderful mix of people that have formed us and shaped us and they in turn have been shaped by their stories and backgrounds. What a rich heritage Riya has with her Hindu forbears and family. What a wonderful adventure is before her as she and her parents move to Kathmandu for three years. How very exciting!

Many of us may ask why would a young girl make the decision for herself to be baptised and become one of those strange people, a Christian, a Christ-follower. In fact why does anyone choose a life where God is consciously chosen and where the spiritual life is given space and time? Well it is pretty obvious that Sarah and R are spiritual people, a couple who care about the deep connections of life and making their life one of meaning and love, so their faith and experience are going to be very important for Riya. There is Riya's school life and friends, her extended family and what she has seen and heard in the popular media. But there is something else going on, something inexplicable and unpredictable, beyond our understanding, beyond those basic parts of human life. It is the fact that God breaks into our world. The universal energy of love finds a way to break into our life, our cultures, our hearts and minds. 'Breaking in' may be the wrong expression because God is in and through all things. We just don't notice or see. Yet somehow God keeps finding ways to be noticed despite our modern world and sensibilities, despite the doubts of agnostics and the disbelief of the atheists.

Our readings today are about how God breaks into our world. There on the mountain, God's presence breaks through the cloud and envelopes Moses. There on the mountain God's presence breaks through when Jesus, Peter, James and John climb to the place where Jesus is transfigured before them. The transfiguration is not often remembered in church these days but it is the most revealing of stories in more ways than one. To be transfigured means to be transformed, to be changed. Jesus is changed in appearance when his face shone like the sun, and his clothes became dazzling white.

This dazzling appearance tells us that Jesus is indeed very special. God's own being and light shines through him and is intrinsic to his very nature. The clincher is when a voice, the voice of God, says, "This is my Son, the Beloved; with him I am well pleased; listen to him!" There is, of course, another time when the voice of God is heard in this way in the gospel accounts. It is at Jesus' own baptism in the river Jordan. On that occasion, just as Jesus rises up out of the water, the same voice says, "This is my Son, the beloved, with whom I am well pleased". These are the only two times God's own voice is heard in the entire story of Jesus—at his baptism and on the Mount of Transfiguration.

Not many of us—in fact I cannot think of anyone I have met—have heard the literal voice of God. Yet God is there and breaks into our heart and mind. It is in the very nature of God, who

is love as John's letters tell us, to reach out to us, to call us, to try and connect to us. It is in the nature of love to long to love and be loved in return. Love in all its aspects yearns for the other. And there is a part of us that longs for God. We long for belonging, for a relationship that will never end, we long for beauty, and goodness and truth. And so God, who is all these things, calls to us. If we are open, listening, if we are looking we will see signs of God's presence and we can then choose to answer that call.

I want you all to take note of what it is that God says there at Jesus' baptism and transfiguration. God says, "This is my Son, the Beloved; with him I am well pleased". We are all made in the image of God, both male and female. And it is the understanding of the New Testament, and countless Christians over the centuries, that as we answer the call of God to walk in the footsteps of Jesus Christ, we too can hear these words addressed to us. The symbolism of baptism is that, as we go through the cleansing and life-giving waters, we rise to a new life, a new identity that we share with Christ. We now hear those words addressed to us. Riya can hear those words of God said to her: "This is my daughter, the beloved; with her I am well pleased."

For Riya, like all of us, is beloved of God. My friends, you are beloved, loved deeply and enduringly. You are loved by the Lord of all whose love is so profound that this Lord would die on a cross to take away all that keeps us from God's self and each other. A Lord who, after rising from the grave of violence and scapegoating, of fear and hatred, came back to those who abandoned and betrayed him and said, "Peace be with you".

Baptism is the holy ceremony that declares this astonishing love of God loudly and makes it manifest to our minds and hearts. In baptism, what is an eternal truth is made visible in our being and before our eyes. In baptism, we make this love relationship with God the centre of our lives and we then take each step from that day forward following in the footsteps of Jesus Christ, the one who came to show us the very nature of God. In Jesus, we find that God is a God of never-ending love, of abundant life-giving mercy, of peace and reconciliation and all goodness. Who wouldn't want to walk in that pathway?!

And that is the journey of every baptised person. We become one with Jesus Christ and claim our inheritance as God's beloved so we too can become signs and givers of love and light. We become one with Jesus Christ so we can join with all those other crazy, wonderful Christians called a church and work together to be signs and givers of love and light.

In the Eucharist, the other great sacrament of the church, we share in a very real and practical way this love of God that binds us together. The bread and the wine, fruit of the earth and work of human hands, are reminders to us that we are in fact one with God, one with each other and one with mother earth. We are all bound to each other, whether we like it or not, and we are given all we need to grow into the fullness of our life as God's beloved.

Riya has her life before her; what some of us wouldn't give to be nine years old and off to Kathmandu for three years! She has before her that wonderful, intriguing and challenging task of being a human being. Yet she can know absolutely that God will always be with her, even if she cannot sense God's presence, even if she doubts and questions, no matter where she goes, what she does, no matter her failings or her successes, God's love will keep calling to her and God's Spirit and grace will always help her. May her road be smooth, her family blessed and her heart be full of God's love and peace. Amen.