

## Baptism of our Lord 2020

Isaiah 42:1-9, Matthew 3:13-17

If I had been working alongside the Prophet Isaiah this past week he would have described those in our care as bruised reeds. A rather nice poetic way of describing those who are at best tired, weary, frustrated, at worst frightened, traumatised. The week has been spent at HMAS Harman dealing with those evacuated from their homes and yesterday at Batlow and Tumbarumba and the remaining residents and the emergency services in those townships trying to deal with a situation which is best described as chaotic.

During the quieter moments I have finished reading 'Helena' an historical novel by Evelyn Waugh on the life of Helena the mother of Constantine the first Christian Roman emperor. Constantine embraces Christianity when he wins a battle against all odds at Milvian Bridge, and it becomes the approved religion of the Empire. You would have thought that Constantine would have dashed off and found Bishop Eusebius to baptize him. But he didn't, not according to Waugh and other historians, because in the early Church one of the controversies that was raging concerned post baptismal sin. The controversy went: If at baptism you are made anew what happens to those sins you commit after baptism? Waugh puts the following on the lips of Constantine: *What does the wise man do - the man in a position like mine where it is impossible not to commit a few sins every now and then? He puts it off till the very last moment. He lets the sins pile up blacker and heavier. It doesn't matter. They'll be washed away in baptism, the whole lot of them, and then all he has to do is to stay innocent, just for a very short time, just to hold the devil at bay for a week or two, perhaps a few hours only. It shouldn't be too difficult. That's the strategy you see. I've got it all planned.* This gives some idea of the Constantine created by Waugh...he is in control!

The classic icon of the Baptism of Jesus in the Eastern Orthodox tradition depicts Jesus naked, up to his neck in water, on one side of the river John the Baptist, on the other three angels holding Jesus' clothes. We see the hand of God descending from above, and underneath, in the depths of the river, you frequently see a little figure who represents the 'river god'. This little pagan character is a representation of the way in which the Baptism of Jesus is understood as a descent into chaos: and in Greek 'chaos' is emptiness, nothingness, the void; this is important. To be baptized is not to be initiated into some pure state of being, or into a community marked off from others. The nature of Christian holiness is precisely that it is not something possessed —a set of achievements, a set of qualifications, a series of boxes ticked. It is a relationship, and can only be understood in those terms. I read recently by Rowan Williams: *To be holy is to be in the neighbourhood of Jesus Christ, and therefore also to be in the neighbourhood of whomever Jesus is in the neighbourhood of. And we see*

*from the Gospels the sort of people he is habitually in the neighbourhood of, and once again we are back to a proximity to, a neighbourhood of, chaos.*

It is great disappointment that we conduct so few baptisms, such is the world at present. They are rewarding but demanding. Trying to explain baptismal theology to Mums and Dads is always demanding as they bring along their little bundle of joy. It is always difficult teasing out what it is they are really seeking. I sometimes stress that being baptized is not some sort of inoculation in fact it is completely the opposite. It is, in a strange sense, about being contaminated; being welcomed into a body that is less than perfect, that is wounded. Remember St Paul with that enigmatic statement 'He was made sin, for our sake.' We sort of heard it again in the reading from Matthew's Gospel, that strange encounter between Jesus and John the Baptist, where the Baptist says, 'why do you come to me?' And Jesus' enigmatic answer effectively says, 'That's what I am here for. To be contaminated by baptism. To be affected by the need, the chaos, the darkness of the world.' And that is the paradox that runs through our baptismal living, our whole sense of holiness. As we heard proximity to Jesus, yes; proximity to those that Jesus is in the neighbourhood of, yes. And therefore an understanding of our identity as itself with Jesus, and in Jesus, an unceasing, mission to those we might be tempted to regard as contaminating, those whose neighbourhood makes us feel awkward, the needy, those out of their minds, away from home, those in exile.

So we are a gathering of broken, wounded folk, we have in our baptisms been immersed into the chaos of the world, we are called to be in total solidarity with those in chaos. But what of this spirit that hovers over us; where is the spirit in the midst of the chaos?

a bruised reed he will not break,  
and a dimly burning wick he will not quench;

The prophet Isaiah speaks, poetically, into a situation where all hope has seemingly been extinguished. It is the scenario of exile of people driven away from their homes by forces beyond their control. In our day it is the vast fires that leave nothing in their wake but smouldering embers forcing people into exile, away from home, out of their minds. The powerful forces of climate change beyond our control. But the prophet reminds us that even in these dreadful circumstances the spirit with which we have been anointed will not be quenched or broken.

The keen eyed among you will have noticed that our Aumbry has been placed on the sanctuary wall. I'd like you to think of it as a battery which is charged every Sunday by our gathering, our prayers, our breaking bread together. The power from that battery will be felt by those throughout the parish who will receive the very same sacrament as us. Many of them are wounded and are therefore at one with us as we are fed with the bread of life. May they find in it the hope that sustains us all. Amen.