

9 Jan 22

Baptism of Christ

Isaiah 43:1-7; Luke 3:15-17, 21-22

Thank you Edward and Caroline for those great readings, both full of God's Promises for us today.

It's so special to have Nadia's baptism within this service, on this special Sunday when each year we reaffirm our faith and recommit ourselves to following Christ. Last year we were in lockdown and did this together in our online service, each person saying their words in their own home, but joined through the Holy Spirit, and the internet. For those of you online today, I do hope you have been able to join in and echo the words we have all been saying in church.

Year by year, we remind ourselves of *God's Promises* to us and take hold of the challenges which lie ahead.

Our first reading from the Hebrew prophet Isaiah is full of *God's Promises*, spanning the past, present and future.

We may think of prophecy as rather like fortune telling, but a more accurate description is that it's the expression of God's Promises, based on how God has acted in the past, is active now and will be in the future.

Passing through waters and rivers, walking through fire, all these were experienced by God's people in the Exodus story found in the Old Testament, as Moses and Joshua led them to the Promised Land.

Down through the centuries, God's people have experienced all these challenges in different contexts, for faith is not an insurance policy against hardship and suffering.

We too will know times in our lives when we feel almost overwhelmed by deep waters:

depths of impossible demands or decisions, or waves of depression, anger or anxiety,

we may face rivers of violence or injustice, or experience the testing fire of relationship breakdown, betrayal and loss.

These past two years have shaken us out of our comfort zones as we've been less able to rely on material wealth or human plans. Yet God's Promises always hold good:

I have been with you, I am with you, I will be with you.

Through Isaiah we hear God's reminders:

I have redeemed you - for us this is the redemption which Christ brings through his saving death for us on the cross

I have called you by name – our names lovingly chosen by parents, names used at baptism, names which speak of identity and significance. God knows us by name and calls us, by name.

You are mine – as Christians we are God's children, members of his family, we can know that God's love for us is unconditional and eternal, not dependent on how hard we try to live good lives, nor on how successful, clever, active or generous we are. We are God's because he loves us first, and this is the bedrock of our faith and our lives.

Let us hear those promises again afresh today, or maybe for the first time:

I am with you, I have redeemed you, I have called you by name, You are mine.

All this God promises to each one who responds to his love in Christ, who chooses to follow Christ, as we have done this morning through the baptism vows.

But there is a greater promise for us as Christians, in the gift and power of the Holy Spirit.

In our second reading, we heard how Luke describes Jesus' baptism, the start of his public ministry when he was around 30 years old. John the Baptist has been preparing the way for Jesus, helping people to recognise how far they have strayed from God and calling them to repent and be baptised as a sign of God's forgiveness. But there is more to come, and John tells his followers that when Jesus arrives, he will baptise them with the Holy Spirit and with fire.

Jesus arrives where John is at the River Jordan, asking to be baptised himself- in doing so he identifies with us in our humanity, and as he is praying, the Holy Spirit is made visible, as a dove resting upon him, and God's voice from heaven affirms that he is his beloved Son.

This is Jesus, Son of Man and Son of God, fully human and fully divine. And this fully human, fully divine Jesus comes to baptise people with the Holy Spirit and fire – fire which brings cleansing, light and power.

The Holy Spirit is powerfully and evidently present throughout Jesus' earthly life, through all his encounters with people, his miracles and teaching, and most clearly at his resurrection, and it is towards the end of his earthly life that he speaks about the Spirit to his friends:

I will not leave you desolate, I will send you the Comforter, the Advocate, the Helper, who will come to you, to be with you for ever..

Thus, 40 days after his ascension, the Holy Spirit- comes down on the apostles gathered in Jerusalem for Pentecost, not visible as a dove this time but as flames of fire resting on each one's head. They and everyone witnessing it receive the Holy Spirit, God's powerful presence to live within them.

This amazing promise is for us too, the presence and power of the Holy Spirit in our lives.

The Spirit is the Helper and so, when we affirm together our commitment to live as God's children, we reply to each question with the words- *with the help of God, we will.*

That's the same answer given by Nadia's parents and godparents a few moments ago – they pledged to support, care and pray for her not in their own strength, but with the help of God.

Although it's a small letter *h for help* in our service sheets I think it needs a capital, the Helper, the Holy Spirit, will enable us to keep going... to keep on praying, listening, loving, serving.

On our own we simply can't do this, so the most vital thing we can do this year as Christians is to allow the Holy Spirit into our lives. We do this every day, through spending time with God in quiet and prayer, through reading the Bible and listening to God, through asking God to open our hearts and minds to see him all around us, in other people, in creation, in all that is good, but also in the challenges we meet. For surely, God's Spirit is with us and within us as we too go through the waters, cross rivers and walk through fire, whatever that may mean for us in this coming year.

God has promised, and God is faithful. Amen.