

Things move quickly and dramatically, though not always chronologically, at this time in the Church's year. Only 2.5 weeks ago it was Christmas and we welcomed the Christ-child, the one who was prophesised to be the 'Prince of Peace' (Isaiah 9:6) into His world. But that was followed immediately by the stoning of the first Christian martyr Stephen, and then by the murder of the holy innocents. No peace there, but a striking reminder of the violence and evil in the world.

But then, last Sunday, the Epiphany reminded us, not just of the visit of the wise men from the east, but of the significance of that event in the revealing of the Christ-child to the whole world. As Peter put it in his sermon in Cornelius's house, "You know the message God sent to the people of Israel, preaching peace by Jesus Christ – *he is Lord of all*". And further that those who met with Christ after His resurrection were commanded "to testify that he is the one ordained by God as judge of the living and the dead". God for everyone, but also judge of everyone.

So, wonderful acts of God accompanied by tremendous words of hope and warning that finally the salvation and judgement of the whole world has dawned upon us. And yet also accompanied by devastating acts of evil and violence, reminding us what the world is often really like. The carol is surely right when it says that 'the hopes and fears of all the years are met in thee tonight'.

But then today we suddenly jump from events surrounding the nativity of Christ to His baptism in the river Jordan by John. Thirty or so years have passed by, and the child is now a grown man about to begin His public ministry. And three things are worth noting in relation to this event. First, that Jesus submits Himself to John's baptism because "it is proper for us in this way to fulfil all righteousness". That suggests that there is a 'correct' way in which the world ought to be, a proper ordering of things which Jesus Himself respects. Second, that Jesus's ministry is accompanied and will continue to be accompanied by the Spirit of God who descends on Him in physical form like a dove. And third that God's voice both confirms Jesus in His relationship with the Father as His Son, and affirms Him as the Beloved with whom God is well pleased. Even Jesus, it seems, needed that confirmation and affirmation. It is, however, a voice from God the Father that is in a rather different key from the voice of God in our Psalm, though it is also good to know that "the voice of the Lord is mighty in operation".

Now how does all that relate to us? Well, we have by tradition (though a fairly short tradition) decided to accompany the Baptism of Christ by the renewal of our own baptismal vows, which we will do straight after the sermon. And let me just add to the

words on the first page of the booklet to say that all are welcome to come to the font, and to join in should you so wish, even if you are not baptised.

But as I thought about this, my first reaction, to be honest, was, ‘What’s the point?’. I mean why bother to do this when the world’s in such a mess? What good can this act possibly do compared with all the violence and evil in the world in our day? It may have something to do with the time of year, of course, with the darkness around us reinforcing the darkness of the world. With the freezing temperatures and the snow this morning making me think that the world is still ruled by the White Witch of Narnia, so that it will always be winter and Christmas will never actually come. Not the hopes, but the fears of all the years dominate, so it seems. And with the fears, the possibility of despair not hope.

But then I thought that this is precisely why we decided, at this point in the year, to renew our baptismal vows. Doing this is a counter-cultural and fundamental statement of hope. It is a way of centring ourselves down on what, in the end, really matters. It is a right and proper thing to do, it reminds us that there is a ‘correct’ way in which the world ought to be, a proper ordering of things.

And it centres us down onto Christ and, through the Creed that we also say as part of this, it centres us on God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. And it also reminds us, as we pray to almighty God, that, as the Psalm put it, the voice of the Lord is mighty in operation. It is important to hold onto that truth about God as well.

And then, following from the renewal of vows and the Creed, in the Affirmation of Commitment on the final page, we make scary promises that we will, amongst other things, persevere in resisting evil, that we will seek to serve Christ in all people, that we will defend the weak, that we will seek peace and justice.

So yes, the hopes and fears of all the years are met in Christ. And in Christ, and in the power of the Holy Spirit, we recommit ourselves to overcoming those fears and to play our part in realising the hope that, in the end, as it says in the Affirmation of Commitment, the whole creation will be made perfect in and through God’s Son, our Saviour (and judge) Jesus Christ.

So let’s do it!