

CCV Baptism of Jesus; Luke 3:15-17, 21-22

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts be acceptable in your side, O Lord, our strength and our redeemer.

In Birmingham, England, there is an Eastern Orthodox church, called the church of Holy Prince Lazar. It was built in the 1960s, by a group of Serbian refugees who had fled to the UK following the crises of the first half of the twentieth century. Many got jobs at Cadbury's chocolate factory in Birmingham. The Cadbury family were devout Quakers and were willing to sell some land to the Serbian orthodox refugees, so they could build a church. The Cadbury family told the Serb workers to raise £5000, more than ten years' salary for a skilled tradesman at the time. The Serbs amazingly managed to raise the sum, but then the Cadbury family said they could have the land for only £1. As soon as they knew the Serbian orthodox worshippers were serious, they were willing not to charge them. Today, the church welcomes Eastern Orthodox worshippers in the area from many countries. Throughout the war, Russians and Ukrainians have worshipped there together. They have sung together in the choir and their children have gone to the same Sunday school. It is a beautiful picture of the love of God in the world.

However, of course that story is shot through with sadness. It is deeply sad and deeply unjust that many people lost their homes and more than their homes in the mid-twentieth century. It's tragic now that the war in Ukraine has raged for so long, with the encouragement of many Christians. It is beautiful to think about this church and its gathered

worship, but of course, it's done nothing practically to bring about a peaceful solution. That is the nature of our world. There is so much good and so much evil. There is the tragedy and injustice of the first and second world wars and there is the generosity of the Cadbury family and the sacrificial giving of the Serbs. There is the violence and aggression of the conflict in Ukraine and the reconciling love of the church family. Our world is a mixed up mess of good and evil.

This morning, I hope that reflecting on Jesus' baptism can help us make sense of that. Because in the story of Jesus' baptism that we've read, we see both that Jesus judges evil and also that he rejoices in his father's love. Jesus both judges evil and rejoices in his father's love.

It's clear from the reading how Jesus judges evil.

*Read vv.16-17.*

The references to fire are striking and shocking, but they remind us that Jesus' judgement is real. Jesus really is opposed to what is evil and will one day deal with it. Jesus uses the image of threshing corn. Ours is not a farming community, so it's easy to miss what's going on. Jesus will shake corn on a threshing floor, so that wheat and chaff separate. Jesus will shake the corn, so the waste product can be burned and the good part, from which we make bread, will survive. That means that of the things in this world, there are some that will not make it into heaven. There is evil in this world that is not destined for heaven but for fire.

And that is good. It may not be comfortable, but it is good. There is too much evil in the world for us not to want to God to judge it. We cannot

look at a world of violence, greed, sexual abuse and bullying and not want that to be over. We cannot think of those Serb families arriving homeless and friendless in Birmingham and think that doesn't matter. It does matter. People matter. Suffering and evil need to be threshed out of God's world. Suffering and evil are destined for fire.

But, of course, if we understand that, it will be sobering to us. Because we cause suffering (at least I do!). We all act in ways that align with evil. None of us love God and neighbour as we should (at least I don't!). All of us are deeply selfish. It is only by God's mercy that any of us deserve God's goodness. We all of us need to come to God and admit all the ways in which we are like moral and spiritual chaff and behave like it. That's why we say a prayer of confession every Sunday, followed by the absolution which reminds us of God's love and forgiveness.

Jesus' baptism reminds us that God judges evil.

But at Jesus' baptism, we also see how Jesus rejoices in the Father's love. Jesus rejoices in the Father's love.

*Read vv.21-22.*

We see the three persons of God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit rejoicing in love. This is one of those wonderful moments in the Bible, when the curtain is pulled back on heaven. We get to go behind the scenes of the very being of God and at the heart of the very being of God is love, the love of Father, Son and Holy Spirit for one another. This is perfect love, love without loss, love without miscommunication, love without clashing needs and desires. This is the love of which the best of romantic love,

familial love and friendship love is only a shadow. This is the love at the heart of God's very nature. This is the love Jesus turns to and enjoys at his baptism, at the beginning of his journey.

Before he begins the challenges and excitements of his life of preaching, healing and delivering, culminating in his death and resurrection, Jesus spends a few moments rejoicing in the pure and unconditional love of his heavenly father, shared in the pure and unconditional love of the Holy Spirit.

At his baptism, Jesus reveals his hostility to evil and his joy at the father's love.

This tells us something about what Jesus is like. It shows us that Jesus is the kind of God this world needs. Jesus is the kind of God you and I need. Because Jesus is a God who judges evil and rejoices in love. Jesus looks at Holy Prince Lazar church in Birmingham and he shares our anger at the war and selfishness that drove those Serbians from their homes. He shares our anger at the ongoing conflict in Ukraine, causing so much loss of life and stability. One day he will cast those things into the fire. But he rejoices in the unconditional love of God that led the refugees to sacrificially build a church, the Cadbury family to pay for it and Russian and Ukrainian Christians today to love one another.

That is the kind of God Jesus is, a God who hates what is evil and loves what is good. The world is so often tolerant of evil and cynical about good, but not our Lord. No, Jesus judges evil and rejoices in God's love, which is a good reason to follow him.

But Jesus' baptism doesn't merely reveal to us Jesus' heart. At least part of the reason Jesus is baptised is presumably to inaugurate baptism for us. Jesus is baptised to show us what baptism is and should be, so we can be united to him in baptism. Jesus' baptism shows us that our baptism is about turning away from evil to the love of God. Baptism is about repenting of sin, casting our own judgement on the evil that we do, and turning to the unconditional love of God. That's what we do when we're baptised. Water symbolises death and rebirth and cleansing, so it fits well with turning from evil to God's love.

In this church, we baptise children, because children can understand the difference between evil and love. They can understand that the world and all of us have evil in us, but God is full of love. They might not be able to articulate it all, but they will understand more and more every day and they're never too young to begin to learn about these things, so we baptise them. Not all Christians think about it like that and if you think baptism is for adults, that's great, you're very welcome. But if you want to know what I think, baptising children is a great way to help them learn to reject evil and rejoice in God's love from the beginning of lives. If that's something you're interested in for your child, let me or Patrick know.

But perhaps it's not your child, but you, yourself, listening to this sermon, who's thinking that you haven't been baptised and you want to make a start, repenting of evil and turning to God's love. Well, that is a great thing to do! Once again, talk to me or Patrick. We'd love to support you on your journey of preparation.

What about those of us here who have been baptised? Maybe we were old enough to remember it, maybe we weren't. That doesn't really matter as long as you know it happened. What was your baptism and why was it important?

Well, there are many answers to that question, but a very important one is this: your baptism was when you began a journey of turning away from evil and turning to the love of God. On the day you were baptised, you were called to live a life rejecting evil and receiving the love of God. Your baptism was not just ticking a traditional box, even if that's what your family thought it was. It wasn't just a bit of magic to bring superstitious protection. It was when you began to say no to sin and say yes to the love of God. That means your baptism is a great motivation to continue doing that. The journey begun when you were splashed with water and the name of God was spoken over you, but it carries on every day, as you turn to sin and receive the love of God.

May we be all be doing that, day by day.