

THE SECOND SUNDAY OF EPIPHANY, 2014
(Isaiah 49.1-7; John 1.29-42)

What better text could we have for this service – a service which, rather wonderfully, contains eight baptisms – than these words from that Gospel reading: John the Baptist said, “He on whom you see the Spirit descend and remain is the one who baptizes with the Holy Spirit” (John 1.33).

Saint John’s Gospel tells us that John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness of Judea, preaching baptism in water for the forgiveness of sins – something we all need. As if this baptism was not enough, though, John proclaimed the presence of the one who would baptise, not just in water but, with the Holy Spirit. What might being baptised with the Holy Spirit mean for us, and for those who come to baptism today?

Three things: in Christian baptism,

1. The Holy Spirit reveals the deepest truth about our being.
2. The Holy Spirit roots our little lives within the greater life of Christ.
3. In the greater life of Christ the Holy Spirit opens our hearts to every other human being.

The Holy Spirit reveals the deepest truth about our being.

In the days when Mrs Thatcher was Prime Minister, there was a celebrated exchange between her and Dr Ian Paisley in the House of Commons. “We are all children of God, Dr Paisley,” said Mrs Thatcher. At which Dr Paisley leapt to his feet and bellowed, “On a point of information Mr Speaker; we are all children of wrath!”

What is the deepest truth about our being? Some Christian theologies have majored on sin, sometimes even going so far as to maintain that our human nature is totally corrupt. But there is a deeper truth than this. In the opening chapter of Genesis, in the first creation story, we read that

God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them (1. 27).

Imagine that you are walking across a bed of gravel. All of a sudden, you look down and see that one piece of gravel appears to be shining. You pick it up and take it home, where you wash it under a tap. As you do this, to your amazement, the outer coat of dirt is washed away and you find yourself holding a most perfect diamond. Amazed and excited, you run back to the gravel bed and pick up a handful of stones. As you hold each one in turn under the tap the outer coat of dirt is washed away, and each is revealed to be a diamond – perfect in beauty, but utterly unique.

This is what the Holy Spirit longs to do in baptism: to wash away the outer coat of dross from our lives so that we can begin to know ourselves, not just as n or m, but as a son or daughter of God – known by God from all eternity, and having an

eternal destiny within the life of God. What Isaiah wrote in the first reading is true for you and me,

The LORD called me before I was born, while I was in my mother's womb he named me (Isaiah 49.1)

As CS Lewis once wrote, we have never met an ordinary human being. Had we but the eyes to see we would realise that everyone we meet is invested with an eternal weight of glory. The Holy Spirit reveals the deepest truth about our being. We are the daughters and sons of God, known by God from all eternity, and having an eternal destiny within the life of God.

The Holy Spirit reveals the deepest truth about our being.

Then, in baptism, *the Holy Spirit roots our little lives within the greater life of Christ*. Writing to the wayward Christian community in Galatia, Saint Paul wrote, My little children, for whom I am again in the pain of childbirth until Christ is formed in you (Galatians 4.19).

Jesus is central to the Christian faith. Last Friday, in the Mental Health Support Group, we were unexpectedly visited by an Jewish man, who shared his understanding of the Hebrew scriptures with us. It is wonderful to hear the meanings of Hebrew words freshly translated, but our visitor freely confessed his puzzlement about Christianity: "You Christians do our Jewish heads in," he said, "How can a man be God? It's impossible!" Yet, that 'God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself' (2 Corinthians 5.19), is the central tenet of the Christian faith.

Jesus of Nazareth was a first century Jew, some of whose life is reported in the Gospels. As we study Jesus' life and teaching we may well feel drawn to his radical and compassionate attitude to life. Many people have been, even non-Christians, like Tony Benn; and great figures from other religious traditions – people like Mahatma Ghandi – have acknowledged their debt to Jesus' teaching, not least in the Beatitudes. But the Holy Spirit takes us further than this: as we struggle to live and work and pray in Jesus' way, the Holy Spirit gradually draws us into a 'Christ-shaped' relationship with God. Again, in his Letter to the Galatians, Saint Paul wrote,

when the fullness of time had come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under the law, in order to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as children. And because you are children, God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying, 'Abba! Father!' So you are no longer a slave but a child, and if a child then also an heir, through God (Galatians 4.4-7)

In Baptism, God breathes the Holy Spirit into our hearts, enabling us to approach God in Jesus' way. Jesus taught us to pray, "Our Father, who art in heaven." When our prayers are animated by the Holy Spirit our prayers become the prayer of Jesus as he cries "Abba!" to the Father.

The Holy Spirit roots our little lives within the greater life of Christ.

Finally, as we find ourselves living within the greater life of Christ, *the Holy Spirit gradually opens our hearts to every other human being*. Yet again, in his Letter to the Galatians, Saint Paul wrote,

As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male or female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus (Galatians 3.27f).

When our little lives are rooted within the greater life of Christ there is the potential for the Holy Spirit of God to enlarge our hearts so that we can make space for every other human being. People may be strangers to us; in appearance, language, custom, and religion, their lives may be foreign to us. But, strangers though they are, they cannot ultimately be strange because, animated by the Holy Spirit, we know that they too are made in God's image. Like us, they are destined ultimately to find the meaning of their lives within the greater life of God: that life in which there is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male or female; for all . . . are one in Christ Jesus. As Isaiah said, in the first reading,

I will give you as a light to the nations, that my salvation may reach to the ends of the earth (Isaiah 49.6).

God's love and will to save is universal.

Baptism is a wonderful and sacred mystery, an outward and visible sign of an inward and spiritual grace. My prayer – for all of us, but most especially for you who are to be baptised today – is that, through baptism, the Holy Spirit will gradually reveal to us,

- The deepest truth about our being: that we made in the image of God.
- The fact that our little lives have been rooted within the greater life of Christ.
- And that, being rooted in the greater life of Christ, the Holy Spirit will open our hearts so that we can discern our kinship with every other human being; for all are made in the image and likeness of God.