

*The Beloved*

Since arriving in Amsterdam one of the places I have visited, as you might expect, is the Anne Frank house – a very sad and troubling experience. And maybe it's because of being here in this city that when I read today's passage from Mark's Gospel this morning I recalled some words of Anne Frank, perhaps the best known of all holocaust victims, from her famous diary. I quote: 'I hear the approaching thunder that, one day, will destroy us... I feel the suffering of millions. And yet, when I look up into the sky, I somehow feel that everything will change for the better, that this cruelty too will end, that peace and tranquillity will return once more...'

Thus wrote Ann, aged 15, on July 15<sup>th</sup> 1944, just days before her discovery and her subsequent deportation to Bergen-Belsen concentration camp where she died months later. What is almost pitiful is her optimism. 'I hear the approaching thunder that will one day destroy us... I feel the suffering of millions'. She knows about the chaos and destruction that is closing in upon her and her loved ones. She knows about the fearful threat that is about to engulf them. And yet there follows this most wonderful, defiant note of hope: When she looks up into the sky she feels that the cruelty will end and peace and tranquillity will return. When she looks up into the sky...

Striking, astonishing words from this articulate and perceptive young woman, and perhaps especially striking when set alongside our Genesis passage this morning. For if Anne Frank speaks of approaching thunder and the threat of destruction, then we find echoes of these in our opening verses from Genesis: 'In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. The earth was a vast waste, and darkness covered the deep'. Here is the threat of destruction. No human ear had yet been created but if there had been one listening then perhaps the sound of this raging, formless deep would have been the sound of thunder. Here is the noise and clamour of chaos. And if scholars are correct then the person who wrote these words probably knew all about chaos and thunder. If some scholars are correct then the writer probably composed this epic poem of creation not in the face of the Nazis but in the face of another tyrannical power, that of Babylon. This writer knew all about invading armies and fear, for Jerusalem and its surroundings had not long since been laid waste by the Babylonians. And yet this passage is defiant too in its

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hopefulness. For this writer too looks up to the sky and in his mind's eye sees the spirit of God hovering over the waters, taming the deep, harnessing the chaos. The spirit of God is bridling the power of destruction and creating instead a zone of order and life and peace. In other words God defies the chaos of Babylon.

So much for our Genesis passage. And then we turn to Mark's Gospel and once again we are in a threatening place. We are in the wilderness, a lifeless and deathly environment, and that wilderness is set in a land that is once again overshadowed by the darkness and suffering of occupation – this time not the Babylonians or the Nazis but the Romans. And as we look our eyes are drawn to this figure of John the Baptist and people are flocking to him for his baptism of repentance. And people go down into the water and we are back once again in Genesis with the deep and the chaos and the threat of destruction, for that is what the waters of baptism symbolise. The baptismal waters symbolise that ancient cosmic deep that threatens to overwhelm and destroy us, and they symbolise too the waters that covered the earth in Noah's day and that destroyed the world. In other words the waters symbolise everything that is deathly and destructive. Then, as we watch, we see this Jesus being plunged into those waters and suddenly something staggering takes place. As he rises up out of the water, look up into the sky and what do you see? We're told that Jesus 'saw the heavens being torn apart', and just look what is happening: as the heavens are torn the Spirit descends upon Jesus like a dove. That spirit that hovered over the waters back in Genesis at creation is back, breaking through the heavens, prising open the world and breathing new life into it. Suddenly the world is being invaded not by the Babylonians or the Romans but by God who is coming to liberate and to set us free as Jesus, God's Messiah, is anointed. Centuries before a prophet had waved his fist at the sky and cried out to God, as some of us are tempted to do from time to time, 'O that you would tear open the heavens and come down'. And now just that is happening. Suddenly the world is torn open. Suddenly the world is penetrated by God at this place, opened to the thrust of grace. God is smashing a way into the world that has become closed to God in order to rescue it from chaos and destruction. And then come those beautiful words, 'you are my beloved son; in you I take delight!' 'You are my Beloved...' - back in the Book of Genesis God looked at what had been created and called it good. God said 'let there be light!' and God called the light good, just as God went on to declare all God made back then to

be good. But here is something stronger. As the Spirit descends the Son is declared not to be just good but ‘beloved’. And we are back with Anne Frank, looking up into the sky, and sensing beyond the fear something hopeful, something life-affirming.

So Jesus’ ministry in Mark’s Gospel begins with this scene. Mark has no nativity story, no journey to Bethlehem, no wise men – he just takes us straight to the adult Jesus being baptised and that ringing declaration that he is the beloved. And I would suggest that this scene is profoundly important for Jesus’ ministry that will follow. What is happening here is that Jesus is being told exactly who he is. His true, God-given identity is being disclosed – he is the Son, the Beloved of the eternal God, the one in whom God is well pleased. And Jesus needed to know that. He needed to know that because when life throws its very worst at you, and when the chaos and the darkness and the thunder invade, you need a strong sense of self. You need a strong confidence in your identity, you need to stand on the firm ground of who you are. And that was never more true than with Jesus.

Think of what was to happen to Jesus as his ministry unfolds. Straight after this baptism he will be tried and tested by the devil in the wilderness, put through the fires of temptation. And then he will be subjected to constant scrutiny and opposition by the religious establishment who hounded him. How do you cope with being constantly harassed and opposed and undermined as Jesus was by his opponents? How do you keep your poise, how do you keep your bearings, how do you maintain your confidence when everything you do is questioned? How does Jesus retain his calm and his inner strength when faced with the storms that his ministry provokes? And of course Jesus becomes increasingly convinced that the road he walks will lead eventually to terrible rejection and suffering on the cross. And is it not significant that no sooner does Jesus first mention that he must suffer and die in chapter 8 of Mark’s Gospel than he is found in chapter 9 high up on a mountain, glowing with divine radiance, and hearing once again that glorious affirmation, ‘This is my Son, the beloved...’? He needed that. He needed that as he faced death, when we think of what he went through – the arrest, the torture, the brutal crucifixion. What does such humiliation and degradation do to you? It diminishes you. It destroys you. You lose your identity and become a nothing. So what is it that holds Jesus together and that anchors him? Well the answer is those words, ‘You are the beloved, with you I am well pleased!’ It is that sense

of being loved that is the key to his ministry. Jesus - at the sharp end of God's invasion of the world; Jesus - as the kingdom he proclaims clashes with the kingdoms and powers and authorities of this world; Jesus - as he is crushed in the collision between God and a world that is closed to God and that resists God: Jesus needed to look up and to hear echoing in his heart the declaration that he was loved - the beloved.

Now, let me tell you something. There is a phrase that we use sometimes as Christians, and it's the phrase 'in Christ'. We speak of being 'in Christ'. In fact it is a phrase that is associated with our baptisms, for when we are baptised we are baptised into Christ so that we are united with him and made one with him. And that is such a profound unity that we must speak of being 'in Christ'. And let me tell you what being 'in Christ' means. It means that everything that God says about Jesus, God says about us. Everything that is true of Jesus is true of us. So, if Jesus is declared to be God's son - then we are sons and daughters of the living God too. And if Jesus is the beloved in whom God is well pleased - then so are we. To be 'in Christ' means to be loved and cherished by God, just as Christ is. And we find that hard to grasp, that we really are loved that much. And so much of our crazy behaviour comes from deep insecurity and the need to know we are loved. And so much therapy is aimed at shoring up our sense of worth and self-acceptance and doubtless that can be helpful. But deep down the key lies not in therapy but in the mystery of divine love. That is where Christ's baptism directs us - that is where our baptism directs us. I love the story of the great Protestant Reformer Martin Luther who was prone to despair and depression and who believed that he was subject to assault by the devil, and who in his very darkest moments of despondency would cry out, 'Baptisus sum,' - I am baptised. This was what anchored him, what grounded and strengthened him - the knowledge of God's love that had grasped him in his baptism and that now held him fast.

I wonder what chaos may come your way in the coming year. I wonder what wounds we bring to the start of the year and what stresses and strains await us in the coming months. If we had the ears to hear I wonder what thunder might be heard echoing in the distance. Anne Frank heard the thunder and looked up and somehow found hope of peace and tranquillity. Jesus looked up and saw the sky torn open and heard the affirmation that he was the beloved who brought joy to God's heart. To be 'in Christ' is to know that the same is

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true of you. So look up, and listen, and go into the months ahead confidently  
in the peace of Christ. Amen.

O gracious God

Bringer of light out of darkness,

Bringer of order out of chaos,

Creator of all that is, we praise you.

Yours is the world that you have declared to be good

and we are your creatures, the objects of your love and delight.

We worship you:

We offer back to you something of the love that

You have poured out upon us –

For that is our true joy.

We praise you for the beauty and the harmony of the world  
You have given us, and for the wonder of life itself.  
And we pray for forgiveness,  
for our spoiling of what you have made.  
Where you have created order you we create chaos and conflict;  
Where you have created light we have sown darkness;  
Where your Spirit summons us to life our spirits are death-bound.

Hear us as we confess our sins.  
Hear us as we confess our need of forgiveness.  
O God, raise us, in Jesus, from death to life;  
Renew us, in Jesus, by your Holy Spirit;  
Baptise us, in Jesus, in your forgiving, renewing love...

O gracious God,  
from chaos and its threat you created order and beauty and balance. But we  
would return your creation to chaos.  
We would raise once again the threat of destruction.  
Teach us to walk lightly and respectfully on your earth;  
teach us to treasure what you have made and to honour  
its witness to you;  
teach us to live within our means and in a way that is sustainable.

We think today of the events of the past week in Paris,

of the murder of innocent people  
and the attempted murder of free speech and expression.  
We pray for the loved ones and relatives of those slain;  
We pray for those who would do such things,  
that they may learn to respect human life  
and to revere the image of God imprinted on all human faces.

Oh God, in whose eyes we are beloved,  
Hear us as we pray for those who feel unloved,  
unwanted and rejected...  
We think of those abused physically or mentally or spiritually...  
We pray for those who struggle to come to terms with broken relationships...  
We think of the depressed and the despairing  
and those troubled in mind...  
We pray for all those whose experiences have made it difficult  
for them to feel loved and of worth.

And we pray for your church,  
the community of the beloved.  
Baptise us anew in the Holy Spirit  
and at the start of this new year we ask your blessing  
on this church.  
May it indeed be a place where no-one is stranger,  
where people know what it means to be loved  
and where we bear witness to the liberation  
that comes from being open to the love of God.

In Jesus name we pray all these things and to your glory. Amen,