

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

13.1.19

### *Baptised into love*

A question: how do you motivate people, and how do you galvanise and inspire them into action – especially when they are feeling apathetic, or indifferent, or just plain fearful? How do you fire people up and move them?

That is the issue that God faces in our reading from the prophet Isaiah this morning. Isaiah is addressing a people whose life had stalled, a nation that had run into the sands. At the turn of the 6<sup>th</sup> century BC Israel's life as a nation seemed to have come to an ignominious end when the armies of Babylon had overrun Jerusalem, humiliated the king and transported leading citizens into captivity. Thus began what is known as the exile: a dark period in Israel's life. Gone was their temple, gone was their city, gone was their pride as a nation and gone, apparently, was God's plan for them. It seemed to be all over. Babylon, it appeared, was a graveyard, a scrap-yard for Israel's dreams.

God, however, is nothing if not tenacious and does not give up. God is not finished with Israel and God's plan is to kick-start Israel back to life and to bring them home. But they need motivating. They need to be spurred. By the time this passage was written it's likely that many of the original exiles had died. Many of the people addressed by these verses had probably been born in Babylon. They'd become acclimatised to it - it was their home. So the prospect of returning to Jerusalem would have prompted in them everything from apathy and indifference to downright fear – fear for the future, fear of insecurity over against the stability of Babylon. So let me repeat the question: how do you motivate people? How do you prompt and energise them when they are listless, or apathetic, or just plain afraid? What is the spark that fires

them with vision and drive? Well, God's way is the right way. God overwhelms them with love:

‘Do not fear, for I have redeemed you;  
I have called you by name, you are mine.’

God speaks words of immense comfort and affirmation, drawing on symbolism and imagery that reminds this people of God's faithfulness to them in the past: ‘When you pass through the waters I will be with you...’, ‘when you walk through fire you shall not be burned’. In other words, do you remember the exodus when I led you out of the fiery furnace of Egypt? Do you remember how you escaped from Pharaoh's pursuing army by passing through the sea? Do you remember the love shown to you then? Do you remember my tenacity that holds fast through fire and water, for this is the passion of the one who created you and who prizes and treasures you?

That is the motivating power of love. It is the antidote to anxiety and to fear and to inertia. It's what renews and invigorates – that deep sense of being held secure in the strong and tender grip of love. And it is exactly what Jesus experienced in his baptism in our reading from Luke. Here Jesus too is on the receiving end of a great declaration of love from God: ‘you are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased!’ Here at his baptism Jesus is baptised in divine love – exactly what he needed to motivate him for his ministry. Luke's version of Jesus' baptism is interesting. Although John the Baptist is no doubt involved he is written right out of the account. In verses that we did not read we are told that John was arrested by King Herod for his pointed and prophetic preaching. Then comes Jesus' baptism - with no mention of John. Why? Well, perhaps Luke is trying to emphasise that what was taking place was directly between Jesus and God. In other words there is an immediacy here between Jesus and the one he called Father. There is no mediator – the Baptist or anyone else - between them. In this moment of baptism, Jesus is embraced by God and affirmed, energised and invigorated by intense divine love, just what he needs

at the start of his ministry. After all, this moment marks the first step on a road that will lead through some fearful places. The road from here runs eventually to Jerusalem where he will enter the deepest darkness, the fiercest storm, the fires of hell. And the one thing he needs, the one indispensable resource for that journey is the knowledge that he is loved. In his mind and in his heart he needs to hear echoes of those ancient cadences: ‘do not be afraid...’ ‘when you pass through the water...’ ‘when you pass through the fire... I will be with you’, ‘you are my son, the Beloved...’ And maybe there is a word here for some of us in this church this morning, some who are passing through the waters and the fire and who need the reassurance that they are loved; or perhaps some who may be feeling becalmed and indifferent in their faith – that it’s all gone flat - and who need fresh motivation.

And on this occasion when we have had the joy of baptising three people, one baby and two adults, we might just dig a little deeper and consider what the love of God really means, especially in the context of baptism. A few weeks ago I had rather a thrill because one of my favourite authors – one of the world’s most distinguished writers - was here in church, present in our congregation. Her name is Marilynne Robinson and one of her books, *Gilead*, is about an elderly pastor, John Ames, looking back on his life as he is about to die. And he recalls how once he and some of his pious friends decided to baptise a litter of cats. The mother cat found them performing this rather bizarre ceremony and tried to rescue her kittens, leaving Ames and his friends to worry lest some of the creatures had been left unsaved. But in his description of these feline baptisms Ames makes an important distinction, between petting a cat and blessing it, as in baptism. As he recalls, ‘I still remember how those warm little brows felt under the palm of my hand. Everyone has petted a cat, but to touch one like that, with the pure intention of blessing it, is a very different thing.’ And he goes on to speak of the experience of blessing like this: ‘The sensation is of really knowing a creature, I mean really

feeling its mysterious life and your own mysterious life at the same time.’ I like that. To be blessed is to be truly known by the one who blesses, known intimately - and for the mystery of your life to mingle with theirs. And that surely is what is happening to Jesus in his baptism. Jesus is known by God, declared to be the Beloved - as the Holy Spirit draws his life and God’s into a deep communion of love.

So too with us. God blesses us – in baptism and beyond – and this involves God knowing us deeply and intimately, drawing our life into his and his life into ours. This is no easy and superficial petting – this is profound union between us and God in which we are deeply known and loved.

That brings me to one last point. God tells Israel through the prophet Isaiah, I have called you by name. And your name, of course, is the real secret of your identity. Your name tells you who you are and it tells others who you are. And one feature of life in Babylon, in exile, is that people are given new names: Jewish names are replaced by Babylonian names. So Daniel, for example, one of the exiles in Babylon, becomes Belteshazzar. And that is indicative of the way that our names and thus our identities are pliable and can be shaped – and sometimes misshaped and distorted. And when God tells Israel that he knows them by name he is saying that as he brings them out of Babylon he is bringing them home to their true name, to who they really are, to their true identity which has been denied them in exile. And so too with us: God knowing us by name means God knows our true self – as opposed to the false self, the false imposter that we sometimes become because of what life throws at us. ‘I know you by name’, says God. I know the real you – the real you who can be redeemed. And so of course people in the Bible are sometimes given new names – for the good. ‘Abram’, becomes ‘Abraham’ meaning ‘father of multitudes’ when he is told that by God that his true identity is not to be as a childless man; and Abram’s childless wife Sarai becomes Sarah because she is told that by God that her true

identity is not be barren but to be the mother of a great nation. And a man called Peter who is all smoke and no fire and who cannot be trusted becomes Cephas the Rock and one of the leaders of the early Christian church. And so from early times there was a tradition of giving someone a name or a new name at their baptism. It's an expression of the fact that in baptism we are known truly by God and our old false self is put to death and we are united with our new - our true - identity in Christ. And the life of the baptised is a quest. It's a life of discovery of our true name, of who we truly are – over against everything that would name us falsely and distort our identity.

‘Do not be afraid, for I have redeemed you:  
I have called you by name  
-your real name and not your Babylonian name-  
you are mine.

We have had the joy this morning of baptising 3 people – one baby, two adults. Little Rosa knows nothing of what has been done to her or for her – that is the wonder of infant baptism. And when in later years she says to you, James and Hilde, ‘why did you do this to me?’ you may say, ‘Well, Rosa, we did this because baptism is your badge of membership of God’s people and it’s the sign that God has given us of how much he loves us. And on that day at the beginning of 2019 you joined with others who were old enough to understand something of that love and who wanted to respond to it. On that day they acknowledged that love as the driving force, the motivation of their lives. Let it be yours too.’ And we pray that Rosa will reply, ‘amen!’