

Year C Epiphany 1, The Baptism of the Lord

Isaiah 43:1-7

Acts 8: 14-17

Luke 3: 15-17, 21-22

Do doves and unquenchable fire mix?

When I read the gospel earlier this week, that wonderful image of the dove stayed in my mind. The dove was well-known as a symbol of peace in those times but was also a symbol of sacrifice and atonement. In another four weeks' time we will read about two doves being an acceptable sacrifice for a poor person, Mary, who presents Jesus in the Temple, witnessed by Simeon and Anna. In that sense the dove was a symbol of sacrifice, that enabled someone to return to right relationship with God.

In today's gospel reading, we can picture Jesus being baptised in the River Jordan, and as he emerges from the water, a form like a dove descends to rest upon him. We know this dove represents God the Holy Spirit. And then God the Father speaks, "You are my Son, the Beloved, with you I am well pleased". In these few verses we have the Trinity; God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Spirit. A powerful moment at the start of Jesus' ministry.

The Holy Spirit is symbolised by a dove, an ancient symbol of peace and yet... John has just told the crowd that Jesus '*will baptise you with the **Holy Spirit and with fire**. His winnowing fork is in his hand, to clear his threshing-floor and to gather the wheat into his granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire.*'

The crowd would have known that when you winnow something you separate the valuable grain from the worthless chaff, which must be removed from the grain to harvest it properly.

John's listeners were being challenged to discard their own chaff and be like the worthy and valuable grain. John said that Jesus will separate the good from the bad, those with value and those without value. And Jesus's measure will be whether:

- ✝ People follow him and accept his teachings of love and peace or reject them,

- ✝ People who wish to lead a life of integrity, honour and self-sacrifice, and those who don't,
- ✝ People who contribute to the ongoing welfare of their community, in love, and those who don't or actively harm their welfare.

Was this just John getting carried away with himself in his description of how Jesus would live out his mission?

No, I don't think John was, although Jesus's approach was far gentler than I think John envisaged. For anyone involved in justice, involved in peace-making, involved in reconciliation and atonement, there has to be a moment when the injustice is named, when it is identified. Injustice cannot be ignored, otherwise it is impossible to achieve the sort of deep peace of God's kingdom that Jesus yearned to offer to all who would listen. Just as a surgeon cuts out a tumour, Jesus knew that for God's kingdom to be experienced, the injustices had to be excised.

Jesus sought peace by addressing injustice. For example, his disagreements with the Pharisees and Chief Priests, and with Tax Collectors, was often about the injustice of their rules, their behaviours and their dishonesty and deceit.

Successful peace-making is often a messy and risky business. In challenging injustice, shining a light on prejudice, discrimination and abuse of power, we all know that things can get fraught and can come at a great sacrificial cost for the peacemaker. For Jesus, his relentless desire for love and peace, for God's kingdom to be experienced by all he met;

- ✝ led Jesus to be a threat to the powerful and privileged,
- ✝ led Jesus to be a threat to all who refused to accept his teachings, who had given up on integrity and honour, who no longer walked in the ways of our Lord and chose not to come back to walk that path, despite the loving offer of Jesus to do so,
- ✝ led those so deep in their sin to submit Jesus to a sham trial, and
- ✝ led him to his crucifixion and death.

Luckily, the dove is also the symbol of atonement. At our own baptism we received the forgiveness of Christ. There can be no coincidence about the dove's symbolism for peace and also for atonement. We cannot have peace in our own hearts unless we are able to say sorry to God for our wrong-doings and wrong-thoughts, for an honest reflection of our lives and coming before

God in repentance. That is why a time for reflection and then saying the confession together is such an important aspect of our liturgy each week.

I was going to quote from Howard Thurman about our work after Christmas, but I see Peter used that quote last week, so I thought, given the recent death of Archbishop Tutu, I would turn to his words.

One of the many Bishop Desmond Tutu quotes that has been shared so much in recent days is:

'If you are neutral in situations of injustice, you have chosen the side of the oppressor. If an elephant has its foot on the tail of a mouse, and you say that you are neutral, the mouse will not appreciate your neutrality'.

For each one of us to achieve peace - and by that I really mean to achieve God's deepest whole-life-shaping shalom - we need to pray. We can offer a prayer to God to help us have a real sense of who we are, warts and all, and how to approach any given situation. In seeking to make peace, in seeking justice, in seeking a world of love and hope, we need to be humble. We need to recognise our own failings, and the impact of these on others; we need to come back into right relationship with God; yes, to seek atonement. It is then that we are more able to walk in the path of Christ and follow his way. It is then that we can fully trust in Jesus, our Christ, in the power of the Spirit. Such a time of prayer and reflection is like our baptism; turning away from evil and turning towards God and the light. All the things we need to let go of, those things which are not good, are like the chaff. We want to offer God all that is good in us, like the grain without its husk.

The Baptism of our Lord was a critical and necessary step in his emerging ministry. The dove, the symbol of the Holy Spirit, peace and atonement, came down upon Jesus. Jesus' ministry to the people of Israel and all nations was about to break open.

Jesus has inspired so many people since then to show love to others, to lift them out of their lives of sin, to lift them out of their lives suffering oppression and injustice, to shine a light on those who abuse their power and authority. Some of these people seem to have been almost perfect; the vast majority have been flawed, imperfect human beings, who somehow still managed to bring God's kingdom, God's shalom, to others. Most of these people we will never have heard about.

They will not be like Mother Theresa or Desmond Tutu, who have with God's grace, found themselves with a world-stage. The majority are people who do their little bit of good, where they are, in their neighbourhood, in the hope that all those little bits of good joined together have a transformational effect.

We are loved by God. We are part of the ministry of the baptised, and as such we are called to be the peace of Christ, and to walk in the way of Christ where we live today; in our conversations, in our relationships, in all aspects of our lives.

Each of us is, thankfully, so different. Together we are part of the beautiful tapestry woven by God. As we reflect on this powerful and spirit-filled moment in the life of our Lord, how can you be like the dove of peace, at one with our Lord and saviour, at one with ourselves, and at one with the world?

I wish you peace in your heart with the love you will always know, the love of Christ our Lord.