**9th June 2013**

**Baptism of Molly Hecht**

**Isaiah 43.1-7; Luke 3.1-17**

*From Isaiah 43: ‘The Lord says have no fear for I have redeemed you; I call you by name; you are mine. When you pass through the water I shall be with you when you pass through rivers they will not overwhelm you.’*

I want to talk briefly about the fact that God knows our name. If we have been baptized we are baptized into the name of Christ, adopted into God’s people. God knows our name we are His and He is ours.

Names are important. When we use a person’s name, especially a first name, a relationship of some kind is implied. If we address someone as Mr. or Mrs. then we imply a formality and distance in our relationship. First names are more informal and intimate. Sometimes they can be used inappropriately, assuming a relationship that is not reciprocated.

I am sure we all get the telesales people ringing us up trying to sell us something. Now and again I get a call asking to speak to Simon.

‘You are speaking to him’.

‘Hi Simon how are you today?’

‘I’m Ok thank you, but who are you? How do I know you? What do you want?’

Using a person’s name implies a relationship.

We often think of baptism as a naming ceremony. Naming happens at baptism, and signifies God’s knowledge of the one baptized and God’s commitment to that person. At the baptism of Christ, which was the subject of our gospel reading, there is no naming, unless the divine voice saying ‘you are my son’ is considered to be such. What is of overwhelming importance is the inexhaustible commitment of God to all whom God knows by name.

The passage from the Old Testament, the book of Isaiah, was addressed to the Jews who were in exile in Babylon and were preparing to return home to Palestine. For many years they had felt abandoned by God. They had complained and felt let down. God replies through the prophet that because he created them, or fashioned them in the first place, God would never abandon them

*This is the word of the Lord, the word of your creator, of him who fashioned you Israel; have no fear, for I have redeemed you. I call you by name; you are mine.*

It is one of the tenets of our faith that behind all things is Someone. There is a Creator. In the mystery of creation and evolution is the mysterious Other – we are more than the sum of our parts – there is more than the world around us.

I heard about a little girl who was sitting on her grandfather’s lap as he read her a bedtime story. From time to time, she would take her eyes off the book and reach up to touch his wrinkled cheek. She was alternately stroking her own cheek, then his again. Finally she spoke up, "Grandpa, did God make you?"

"Yes, Sweetheart," he answered, "God made me a long time ago."

"Oh," she paused, "Grandpa, did God make me too?"

"Yes, indeed, honey," he said, "God made you just a little while ago."

Feeling their respective faces again, she observed, "God’s getting better at it, isn’t he?"

I had the visits of three school classes on Thursday – just under a hundred children – anting to look round the church. I was exhausted – teachers – I don’t know how you do it!

I was determined that their visit wouldn’t be all about the history and the architecture of the place, as if the church was museum to the memory of faith. So I concentrated overwhelmingly on what happens within these walls now.

I talked about all the various things that take place here and I talked about worship. I had a box wrapped in bright and attractive wrapping paper. I asked the children to think of what might be in the box. Could it be something special? A nice surprise? What if it wasn’t? Would they still want to see what was in there? Where would they put the box? Would they hide it and keep it for themselves. Would they share the contents? How did they feel wondering about what was in the box/ did they feel excited or curious. I said some people have things that are very special to them or precious. Things they keep to themselves or are willing to share.

Sometimes in life we experience things that we can’t find the words to describe them, but maybe we feel full inside. We call this feeling awe or wonder. Some people feel this way when they see a beautiful sunset or a view from a high mountain, or a quiet forest. It is how some people feel about their precious things. That is how Christians feel about god and is part of what worship is, to say that god is so wonderful we can’t put it into words. God knows us by name – it is awesome.

But also we don’t know what is in our box -. Sometimes in life we get nice surprises. Good things happen – we are full of joy and good emotions. Sadly sometimes not so good things happen to us or are even done by us and we experience negative emotions. In worship we come before the God who knows us by name and maybe we say thank you for all the good stuff and are full of awe and wonder. Maybe we can see purpose and plans through it all. Sometimes we need to say sorry for the mess we are in or have made and seek forgiveness and a new start.

Sometimes we ask why, why has this happened. Sometimes we need to ask, ask for help, for healing, for peace.

All this is part of the mystery of life, what’s in the box, a life shared with the God who created life and sustains life and shares life with us and knows us by name. And life is much richer when we share all of life with other people, the community of faith, who also share in that knowledge that perspective, that way of seeing life, under God, known by name.

Since the beginning God has attempted to get people’s attention and to call them into a commitment to live with principles, values, and sense of sacredness that God wants from all humanity. Sometimes the people heard and responded to God, and sometimes they ignored God.

Christians believe that God took on human form, walking among us and living with us so that we would understand.

It is in the living, breathing person of Jesus that we believe we really see all things we call holy, such as forgiveness, sharing, joy, vision, courage, perseverance, and especially love. We might think we understand love, for example, but when we receive totally unconditional love from another person, love takes on a completely new meaning for us. When we experience being a parent, love takes on a new meaning also.

It was Jo, my eldest daughter’s sixteenth birthday last week. We had a meal together as a family and Libby her sister had put together some pictures of various stages of her life. One reminded me of the first time we went on a ferry boat - across to France. Jo was about three years old and she was sea sick and threw up all over herself. I was sat next to her at the time and she immediately shared her calamity with me. ‘Daddy’ she cried flinging herself on me. We had no change of clothes. The two of us stunk of vomit for the next four hours.

Jesus shows us the ultimate example of love, namely, God’s love. Seeing this example in the flesh makes all the difference in the world for us. Being baptized into Christ is a high calling to immerse yourself in that love and follow that way of love in the name of love. It is a name to live up to.

God knows his people by name and this indicates a special relationship that will not be broken on God’s side. The reference to waters, rivers and fire shouldn’t be taken too literally. This is poetical language. They indicate general dangers that will face the people as they make their journey back from their exile in Babylon to Jerusalem and Judah.

*When you pass through the water I shall be with you*

*When you pass through rivers they will not overwhelm you;*

*Walk through fire and you will not be scorched, through flames and they will not burn you*

*I am the lord your God, the Holy One of Israel, your deliverer*.

Having faith is no guarantee of happiness and prosperity. Being baptized is no good luck charm, as though no disasters will befall you. If you want to play with words this passage in Isaiah does not put into the mouth of God ‘you ***won’t*** have to pass through water, or rivers, you won’t have to walk through fire, through the flames’. It says ‘***when*** you pass through water I shall be with you, rivers – they will not overwhelm you, fire, you won’t be scorched, flames- they won’t burn you.’

Faith in God can help us in our times of trouble as well as in our times of joy. I recently visited someone in hospital. He was in great pain, enough to make him resort to swearing, even in the presence of a minister!” at least you know there being honest. ‘I’m a poor sod’ he said, wincing through the pain. But then he grasped my hand, looked me in the eye and with a smile said ‘I’m also a rich sod too. I’m rich in faith. I know I’m being held and sustained by God and every kindness given to me, every shaft of light that flickers in this darkness, reassures me that God is there.’

Life is full of uncertainties. Faith is ever changing. Sometimes those periods of fire can make us feel that life is too hot to handle, or being overwhelmed by the waves makes us feel as though we are drowning. Often faith is refined in those periods. John the Baptist promises a refining in life, involving repentance, a turning and a changing of direction, and through Jesus we have someone who baptizes us with fire.

Molly is starting out on a life which will have all of that. Many of you here in your senior years may reflect on how your faith has changed and be refined. This is why it is good to belong to a church where we can encourage each other and share the wisdom of the ages.

Knowing you are loved is vital for our whole wellbeing. Even when humanity may let you down, knowing you are loved by God is foundational for our wellbeing. But faith is a mystery. I read a very harrowing and sad article the other day in third Way magazine[[1]](#endnote-1). It recounted childhood sexual abuse. Sadly there isn’t a day goes by on the news without some story of this nature. The article pleaded with the public to hear the stories of the victims and not just revile the perpetrators. The silence needed to be broken.

The writer of the article, Jane Grayson, had interviewed a girl who she called Rose who told of how she had been abused by an uncle but felt that no one wanted to hear her story. She was had a strong faith and had prayed that God would protect her and stop this evil.

The writer of the article asked do we tell children that God is a deep deep mystery. That He allows, and has allowed, men and women of profound faith to feel abandoned by him and he has not intervened even when people have been hurt.

Grayson goes on:

‘I know many who identify with Rose in that simple prayer and who are confused by this God of love who allows suffering. Perhaps that contributes to Rose’s story being so uncomfortable. In difficult circumstances adults discover how their faith has grown up – or whether it has. Some simply give up.

The stark fact is that Rose still suffers even after sincere fervent prayer. We cannot accuse her of having little faith. What do we say? What do we feel? We do not have answers. We have only God himself.

But we do have him. I believe we do.

A friend told me that she felt somewhat impotent when she couldn’t do anything. ‘But it’s so good you just being here!’ I replied. In fact I need to remove the word ‘just’ in order to express the value. ‘It’s good your being here!’ To be with a person even if we do nothing is very potent and that plays a significant part in the lifelong process of healing. Jesus final words were his promise to be with us always. And because we are his body, we represent Him being with others.

We do have Emmanuel, God with us, in relationship with us. And in times of my own darkness, He has posed a terrible challenge to me. I have heard a whisper, ‘Am I sufficient? Or do you want more than Me?’ hard, hard questions.

Rose said how she once found herself crying out to God. She faced an empty chair in her room and visualized Jesus sitting opposite her. Her facial expression was glowering. Whatever he would say she was ready with the answer ‘That doesn’t help!’ But the Jesus she was picturing didn’t speak. After half an hour of silence she said to the chair opposite ‘well what do you have to say for yourself?’ She writes that ‘God’s silence persisted for longer than I was comfortable but just before I got up top swish away the disgust at his usefulness, some words came into my mind that I can only say were not my own idea. The voice was very gentle, and it was very honouring.

The words I heard were these: ‘this is the story of my beloved’

Jane Grayson writes that for rose hope was rekindled: she was profoundly consoled. God must have held on to her. This was holy ground. Yet she was also intensely bewildered. Like Mary at her annunciation she asked, ‘how can this be?’

Who are we? Baptism declares that we belong to God and that God, our creator, loves us. It will take a lifetime and more to come to terms with that. We will have to pass through rivers and fire; we will feel overwhelmed and scorched. But God knows our name and will not let us go and gracefully lead us on to live up to our name in Christ.

1. Jane Grayson, Quiet please: abuse in progress, Third Way June 2103 [↑](#endnote-ref-1)