

Sermon Easter 5 – Baptism ‘Atticus’

Introduction

This morning two dominical sacraments the Eucharist and Holy Baptism are brought together in one liturgy as we celebrate the baptism of baby Atticus. Interesting name, Atticus. From a little online research I note for instance that it's a name attributed to a Greek philosopher, an early Christian martyr, a 5th century Archbishop of Constantinople and, from literary connection, the heroic character of Atticus Finch in the highly acclaimed novel, *To Kill a Mocking Bird*. Some of us perhaps recall actor Gregory Peck's epic portrayal of that role in the film version. It is set in the State of Alabama and is the account of a lawyer's attempt to defend a black man who stands accused of a crime he didn't commit concerning the rape a white girl. What is courageous about the novel is the way it explores issues of racism and bigotry that distort the moral compass and corrupt the cultural mores that people ascribe to.

Quite apposite considering the furore in the news this week involving on the one hand institutional corruption and the search for justice for the Hillsborough 96 and, on the other hand, remarks made by politicians evoking a row about a culture of anti-Semitism.

So Atticus – strong name, your parents have set the bar pretty high – no pressure ...

Baptism Shapes our Christian Identity

Today Atticus is to be baptised and I want us to think this morning about the way baptism gives shape to our Christian identity. Baptism signifies a rite of passage into the Christian community and it is appropriate that it takes place within the wider context of our worshipping life. This enables Atticus and his

family to have a greater sense of belonging and for the worshipping community to be reminded of its identity as a baptised community. Therefore, we each benefit from witnessing the rites which canon Nicola will administer – the use of light and our turning away from darkness towards the light of Christ; the ancient practice of anointing with oils of baptism and oils of chrism; the sprinkling of water signifying the mystical washing and in some cases putting on a Christening robe, symbolising putting on the garment of Christ.

I can well remember visiting a church in Perth in Western Australia where the worshipping community presented all newly baptised infants with a white T shirt with a motif that *read I was baptised at St Luke's Cottislowe*, which I thought was a pretty neat idea for that surf-loving community.

Baptism and the Story of Faith – Philippi ...

Essentially baptism is a special gift and it is hard to explain what it means for us in a few words because it is intended to mark the start of a life-long journey. A journey shared in company with others learning together the rituals and stories of faith.

For instance, the story from scripture that we heard this morning tells of the apostle Paul, together with his companions, forming small Christian communities in different parts of the Mediterranean world. Act 16 vv 9-15 focuses on their feeling summoned to visit Philippi which was “a Roman colony”, in other words a place that embodied Roman culture and the far reach of imperial Rome. Perhaps Paul is drawn there because he feels that a place like Philippi is precisely where the gospel of the Lord Jesus is needed most. As one commentator writes:

In places just like that God planted (and still plants) the church to be the community that says “no” to the ways of imperial power and offers a different way of life, a different story, and a different promise’.

From the outset Paul’s vision had involved a Macedonian man but it is a woman Lydia, whose heart was opened to Paul’s preaching in this story. She it was who was baptised along with her whole household, and she who opened her home with the invitation to Paul and his companions to “come and stay”. It’s an invitation that committed itself in trust before it had full knowledge of where this might lead but there, in this small corner of the empire, a seed was being sown that would lead to the formation of a Christian community offering a different path, a different story and a different way of being.

One who Abides

The story of faith is about change. It’s the understanding of our being drawn into a closer fellowship with God. This fellowship becomes possible through the good news of Jesus. His incarnate life breathes into the world the spirit of the divine and through his dying and rising, imparts the gracious gift of his abiding presence. It is this that gives to believers a new identity manifesting a gracious hospitality that beckons us to ‘come’ and ‘see’ what the Lord has made known. “Those who love me will keep my word, and my Father will love them, and we will come to them and make our home with them”.

My home is with you and I will remain with you – these sentiments evoke a response in our hearts – trusting in God without full knowledge of where this might lead to (as in the case of Lydia) and to places where cultural and social boundaries need to be challenged as in the heroic literary example of Atticus Finch. The place where we abide with Christ becomes the place where the values of kingdom become tested and lived out.

Conclusion

In a week where the moral compass has shifted between Hillsborough and anti-Semitic rhetoric, it's good to remind ourselves of our **Christian identity for which baptism provides a wonderful inspiration.** And central to the vision of our baptismal life is the font. The font we are using today is not an ancient font but one designed from Bristol blue glass. Engraved in the perimeter is a commemorative reminder of the commitment and courageous work of a few noble minds who steered the moral compass of this nation towards the eventual abolition of the slave trade act in 1807 and the gradual dismantling of what today is regarded as a heinous crime. May the waters of baptism always put before our eyes our need for grace and our need for the commitment and courage to turn to Christ, to repent of our sins and to renounce evil.

Amen