

The Baptism of Christ (25)

We have moved very quickly in time and context from last Sunday! We have moved from the crib and the Visit of the Magi to the River Jordan and some wild swimming when an adult Jesus is wonderfully baptised. His 'Epiphany moment' comes with a voice from heaven proclaiming 'You are my Son, the Beloved'. St Luke doesn't want us to miss the importance of this dramatic and very public witness; that the One who was to come, proclaimed by John, is now empowered by the Holy Spirit 'in bodily form like a dove', we are told, the Messiah in our midst, who has come to save us!

It is a wonderful splash to the beginning of a new and very special ministry in which Christ is never shy in coming forward and never shy in mirroring the fullness of the Trinity which his first followers would not have been able to articulate.

For the majority of us baptised as children and welcomed into different communities of faith, we would not have known much about what was going on at the time. Even our parents and godparents may have felt uncertain about the symbolism and meaning of that great day of initiation and welcome into the mystery of faith and fellowship which the Church is, across every continent and island.

But however much we reflect on this special sacrament and gift, our Baptism tells us everything we need to know about belonging to Christ, being welcomed and adopted into his wider family. And more than that, it is about that lifelong

learning and understanding – nurture if you will – that we depend upon that unbreakable bond of God’s love for each of us, called by name, to follow, serve, and die for Him.

Only yesterday I read of such a life, someone I must confess that I did not know – someone very special to the newish Dean of Southwark Cathedral, Mark Oakley. He writes of a Russian refugee who found herself in Paris, sheltering and feeding other refugees from her homeland, with little money to hand, and then, later, doing the same for Jews in Eastern Europe. This extraordinary woman became a nun, and Mark comments it is hard to think of a less nun-like nun: a divorcee, a single mother, a person who loved arguing politics over plenty to drink, as she smoked her cigarettes, and whose neighbours often complained about the noise and late-night laughter. I speak of Mother Maria Skobtsova. Her faith, she said, had taught her that life was only begun when you gave up possessiveness.

With the local Orthodox priest, Fr Dimitri, she forged baptism certificates to help Jews to escape. “If we were true Christians,” she reflected, “we would all wear the yellow star.”

Eventually, they were both arrested. When Fr Dimitri was being interrogated by the Nazis, he was asked whether he knew any Jews. Dimitri held up the crucifix that he was wearing and said, “Yes, this one.” Both Maria and Dimitri died in the camps (Maria in the gas chamber on Holy Saturday). Her journal writings are described as poetic and inspiring.

“Piety, piety,” she wrote, “but where is the love that moves mountains?”

Our Christian calling and witness may seem so much weaker by comparison but that is not what I am saying. To start a New Year with the conviction that our Baptism and our Belonging to Christ can actually move mountains, is something worth holding on to.

Maria was made a saint of the Russian Orthodox Church in 2008. She is known as “Mother Maria of the Open Door”. And the Dean says: ‘I cannot think of a more urgent image for the Christian vocation at the moment than to have our doors open – to the vulnerable, unsafe, and hunted. I keep her picture in my prayer corner at home.’

I offer you this prayer of St Anselm because, although we may think Epiphany is confusing in terms of the chronology of Christ’s life, there are clear links to be made between Baptism being that true, epiphany moment for all of us (consciously or not): to be called to know, love and follow Jesus:

“Lord, teach us to seek You, and show Yourself to us as we seek; for we cannot seek You, unless you teach us, nor find You, unless you show Yourself. May we seek You, in longing for You, and long for You, in seeking; may we find You, in loving You, and love You, in finding. Amen”.