

**The Baptism of Christ 2019. A sermon preached at St Andrew's Church Soham by Revd Eleanor Whalley.  
Is 43: 1-7; Ps 29; Luke 3: 15-22**

*May I speak and may we hear in the name of the living God; Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.*

Not only is this the season of Epiphany,

it's also the season of Diocesan Statistics for Mission.

This in my hand is a draft of the form that

Margaret Fisher – one of our church wardens; Geoff's dear wife - nobly fills in ever January.

It comes from the Diocese and its purpose is

to update the Diocese in on what's been going on over the last 12 months.

It's all about numbers, statistics, 'bums on seats' as Christopher Palmer always puts it to me.

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Whether numbers, statistics and bums on seats are useful indicators of what's been going on

might be worth questioning,

but we're not going to go there today...

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This year's form records that during 2018

22 baptisms happened in this church.

I have to say, it felt like more.

2 were baptisms of adults and the rest were baptisms of children.

Many baptism families came back to this church over Christmas:

they were here for Christingle, and for the Crib Service.

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One of last year's baptisms

particularly sticks in my mind.

When I christened him, Marco was nearly 2.

Marco's mum teaches at The Weatheralls,

and I said to her when I saw her the other week

that if there's an age to avoid – in my opinion - when you're planning a christening,

nearly 2 is it.

I'm always happy to christen anyone (it's important to say that), however old or young they are,

but if a child is between 1 and 3,

I stand on my head trying to find ways not to make them scream.

I don't want to traumatise them.

With Marco, we stood him on the little brown table I usually put my books on.

The font we always move to the middle, and Marco and his table stood just behind it.

Marco was very enthusiastic about helping his big sister pour the water into the font.

We use a lovely shiny (thanks to Judith) brass jug – he liked that -

and once the water had gone in, Marco stayed on his stool quite happily.

I stood behind him, and I rattled through the words of the Profession of Faith as quickly as I could, before our luck ran out.

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It wasn't very long before Marco had his hands in the font.

He began to splash water everywhere – and really splash it.

Even before I'd christened him, Marco, his supporters and I were covered in water.

We were all soaked.

When it came to the moment of baptism,

there was so much water flying around, I had no problem at all getting some onto Marco's head.

In fact, once I'd done my bit, Marco continued baptising himself,

picking up great scoops of water, and ladling them onto his head.

It was the funniest baptism I've ever conducted.

I made the mistake at one point of looking up into the congregation.

There was a lady laughing so much I started laughing too. I wasn't sure how I was going to get through to the end.

But get to the end we did.

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The point of telling you that lovely story

is to get us thinking about water.

Baptism – the word, in Greek – literally means plunging.

It means being submerged in water.

There's nothing inherently religious about the word – it just means being plunged in water and pulled out again.

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Marco loved the water,

but water in the Bible – and, specifically, in the Bible, the sea - usually has to do with forces of darkness.

Not always, but most of the time, water – the sea - has to do with chaos.

That's why, in that wonderful vision in the Book of Revelation, in the passage that's often read at funerals,

John writes, 'There was no longer any sea':

in this new world, this new order, the things of darkness have passed away.

Water was there in the beginning –

there before God brought order.

The words of today's psalm hark back to that

'The voice of the Lord is upon the waters:  
the God of glory thunders... the Lord on the great waters':

God's word – God's creative word - rings out over the crashing sea, over the roaring waves.

God speaks into that primeval darkness, as he did 'in the beginning'.

God says, 'Let there be light'.

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For people who lived in Biblical times –

and, indeed for many people on earth today -

water posed – and still poses - a very real threat.

Think of the images of people attempting to cross the channel over Christmas:

refugees and migrants travelling in tiny boats.

That's the kind of threat – the kind of vulnerability - we're talking about:

humanity up against forces many times stronger than we are.

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Water – the sea – in the Bible is usually about that.

We're not just talking physical forces.

We're talking forces of darkness –

forces of that which is not of God.

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If you have access to the internet,

it's worth Googling 'Baptism of Christ Eastern Orthodox icon'.

In Eastern Orthodox icons,

images of the Baptism of Christ

often have pagan river gods - little naked figures - there in the waters

there near the feet of the figure of Christ.

Sometimes there's a naked woman. She's often wearing a crown.

The woman is a symbol of seduction – not very politically correct.

She stands for a force, a compulsion, a drive

that might lead the faithful astray;

a temptation that is hard to resist.

The woman and the river Gods are there in the depths – there in the waters -

there in the turbulence into which Christ is plunged.

They symbolise danger.

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It's interesting – or, at least, I think it's interesting - that Luke

in his baptism story – the story our John read to us just now - doesn't make much of the image of water.

Luke hints at darkness – at danger - another way.

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As we heard, Luke pauses in his account of Jesus' baptism

to tell us what happened next to John the Baptist.

The other Gospel writers save that 'til later, but Luke writes about it now:

'Herod the ruler,' Luke writes, Herod who had been 'rebuked' by John the Baptist...because of all the evil things he had done, 'added to them all by shutting up John in prison'

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John the Baptist suffers for speaking God's truth; he suffers for doing the right thing. Herod puts him in prison.

Later, of course, Herod will have him decapitated; decapitated on the whim of Herodias, his brother Philip's wife.

What happens to John the Baptist gives us a hint of what will happen later to Christ.

That sense of foreboding is there at the very start of Christ's public ministry in Luke –

this is the danger – this is the vocation – into which Christ at his baptism chooses to be plunged.

This is what he's signing up for.

The forces of darkness are real.

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After he's told us what will happen to John the Baptist, Luke goes back to Jesus:

'After Jesus had been baptised and was praying, the heaven was opened and the Holy Spirit' – the Holy Spirit who brooded, remember, over the waters of creation – 'the Holy Spirit descended upon him in bodily form like a dove, and a voice came from heaven, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased."'

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A dove in the Noah story is what heralds the end of the flood:

by coming back with an olive branch, and then not coming back at all,

the dove brings the news that the waters have dried up.

And yet God's words, God's promise to Christ at his baptism,

and, I'd say God's promise to us who are baptised,

isn't necessarily to dry up the flood; it isn't necessarily to take the waters away – at least not in this life.

In this life there'll always be sea, there'll always be waters, whatever form those waters take.

God's promise is the promise of today's first reading –

the promise in chapter 43 of the Book of the Prophet Isaiah

'Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by your name, you are mine. When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you...':

God promises to be with us, in our passage through the waters.

God doesn't promise to take the danger – the turmoil – away. He promises to be with us through it.

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The waters – the flood – for us who are God's people are not the end.

Christ has walked the path through the waters.

He made that passage at his baptism,

and he made it supremely through his death -

a time when darkness again covered the face of the earth

covered it from the sixth hour until the ninth.

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For Christ, of course, death was not the end: Christ's death brought about a new creation.

The waters of death became the waters of rebirth – for Christ, and, please God, because of our baptism, also for us.

Paul writes in his Letter to the Romans, 'Christ, once dead, can never die again'.

Christ lives, and our Christian hope is, we will one day live with him: live in the light of everlasting day.

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That journey, that movement

is the movement of baptism:

that Paschal movement – that Easter movement - from death to life, from darkness to light.

That is the journey we who are baptised

travel with Christ from the moment of our baptism:

with Christ, we pass through the waters.

And we don't just do it once, we do it again and again:

we travel through the waters of whatever life throws at us,

until we reach that other shore;

and we travel with God, whose children we are.

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The hope of that, surely, brings a peace and a confidence –

and here's the corny bit –

a peace and a confidence worth splashing around;

splashing around Marco-style.

Amen.