

A SERMON BY THE REVEREND TIMOTHY A. R. COLE

The Baptism of Our Lord Jesus Christ (B)



Sunday, 7 January 2018

Genesis 1:1-5
Psalm 29
Acts 19:1-7
Mark 1:4-11

*The Sea of Faith
Was once, too, at the full, and round earth's shore
Lay like the folds of a bright girdle furled.
But now I only hear
Its melancholy, long, withdrawing roar,
Retreating, to the breath
Of the night-wind, down the vast edges drear
And naked shingles of the world.*

Back in 1984 (perhaps appropriately the year that is the title of George Orwell's famous apocalyptic book) an English Anglican priest and academic, Don Cupitt, produced a TV series entitled with the first line of this stanza of the poem, "Dover Beach", by Matthew Arnold, "The Sea of Faith."

The series takes this theme of the receding tide of faith as its key note as Cupitt tries to construct a view of the world that retains some of the goodness of faith generally and Christianity in particular while accepting a secular materialist view of the universe, accepting that the materialists are right and that there is no spiritual dimension to life, no God. It is a view with which Matthew Arnold would have largely agreed.

Now, we might point quickly to the absurdity of this approach from the perspective of those of us who believe. After all, how can you expect people to believe in and value a faith based on an untruth. If the incarnation or the resurrection are not real historical events then we, as believers, know we would be wasting our time. We would be basing our lives on a falsehood. "You can not have Christianity without Christ," I suspect most of us would want to say.

And yet Cupitt and Arnold are not alone. I think many of the secular people I knew in the British Army – and quite few that thought of themselves as good Christians – did precisely that. They wanted the fruits of Christianity and faith without the belief that, as Paul says in Second Corinthians 5:19, "God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself."

"Padre, I believe in Christian values and Christian morality. I try to live a good Christian life but, as to the rest of it, miracles and heaven and hell and the like, well, I just don't buy that." John Lennon was singing the song of this secular faith when he sang "Imagine there's no heaven – its easy if you try."

In our reading from Acts today we see Paul at Ephesus encountering some people who had been baptized by John but who had never heard of the Holy Spirit. When Paul lays hands on them they are filled with the presence and the power of God.

The Biblical scholar William Barclay sees in this difference between the baptism of John and that of Jesus, the two fundamental stages in the religious life. In the first stage we come to recognize that we are not what we should be. We have failed to be the people that we could be. “That stage,” Barclay says, “is closely allied to an endeavor to do better that inevitably fails because we try in our own strength.”

In the second stage we come to see that God still wants us. God is the loving father who longs to forgive us and welcome us home. “Closely allied with that stage,” Barclay says, “is the time when we find that all our efforts to do better are strengthened by the work of the Holy Spirit, through whom we can do what we could never do ourselves.”

The incident at Ephesus shows us one great truth – that “without the Holy Spirit there can be no such thing as complete Christianity. Even when we see the error of our ways and repent and determine to change them, we can never make the change without the help which the Spirit alone can give.”

Anyone who has known a crippling addiction knows this for a fact. Without a higher power, no amount of will power, no amount of resolve or desire to change, can ever prevail against a deeply ingrained addiction. And for all of us, whatever we are or do or strive for in our lives, we can never be what we could be without the Holy Spirit that makes us able to do what we could never do ourselves. The Spirit that comes to us from above, from outside ourselves.

Of course there are many spectacular stories of how people have believed that God has helped them. Like the Reverend Peter Marshall who was Chaplain of the Senate here from 1947 to 1949. He heard God’s voice in the dark one night as he was walking across a field, only to discover he had been walking straight towards a quarry and had stopped just inches away from the edge.

But for most of us, I suspect, the sense of the strength that the Spirit brings is less dramatic if no less important. Like the peace that was given to several people I have been with as they prepare to face their own death, or the hope and sense of God that has been given to many people in this wonderful church through the service they give to support the worship, or the feeding ministries, or to the children in the Sunday School, or just to one another in acts of kindness and care. In these things we are aware that some of it is in us, but that the key part is given from outside.

“In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. And just as he was coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on him. And a voice came from heaven, “You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.”

Today we celebrate the Baptism of Jesus. It is an event that highlights exactly this contrast, this choice, this relationship between the spiritual and the physical. John baptizes with water. More than that, he calls the inner person to know their need of change, for repentance and forgiveness. This is all that we human beings can do. The best we can do. To try to change. To try to wash away the past and start again.

But in Jesus we see something much more. We see the heavens torn apart. This is not the sky you know. This is the boundary between the physical world and the spiritual world that is being torn apart. The Spirit of God breaks through and descends “like a dove.” You notice it says, “like a dove.” It is not a dove fluttering down from the sky, as you so often see in pictures. It is like a dove. Pure and gentle and full of peace, despite the immeasurable power that it brings in its wings. A power that has undone the physical world and laid it wide open to something infinitely deeper.

Whatever the state of the Sea of Faith in our world, and tides come in as well as go out, the choice remains the same. Does our experience of love and beauty and relationship, and our everyday living, lead us to accept a world where there is just water and human striving on a darkling plane, or does our experience of the joys and tragedies and accidents of living lead us to conclude that there is a spiritual dimension to the world; that God is the most reasonable explanation for what we see around us and in our hearts and minds?

For me, and I am sure for many of you, the answer is blindingly obvious, but even if it is not so for many people, the key fact for you and me to grasp in this is that our experience of life is no less true or credible than anyone else's. Don Cupitt, Matthew Arnold, John Lennon, and all those who chose to believe in a Godless universe are only doing what we are doing, choosing to interpret their experience and the world in a way that makes sense to them.

Either their conclusion is right and we are wrong, or we are right and they are wrong. But we are all in the same boat. We are all on Dover Beach listening to the roar of the shingle and the tide. For some the sound is of a melancholy withdrawing. For me, at least, it is sound of the heavens being drawn apart, and I wait for the next appearance in my life of the figure that is forever rising out of the water towards the shore. It is a reasoned choice. It is a choice of the heart and the mind and the soul.

So choose to look for the Spirit that rends the curtain and breaks in upon our world and brings gifts from on high. We need look no further than this altar here for this to happen. For in every Eucharist, the heavens are rent, the dove descends, and Christ is here.

We also are baptized in the same baptism. We are not the Christ, but we are beloved. And even if our lives are less than pleasing in our own eyes, we, God's children, are as pleasing in his, just as our own children that play upon this stony beach, are pleasing in ours.



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