I’ve had my first few days back at work this week, seeing people, picking up issues. All the usual stuff. I was tempted to play ‘Back to Work Bingo..’ You score a point every time someone says, ‘How was your Christmas?’ or starts an email with ‘Happy New Year!’ Slightly more points for other favourites like, ‘Anyone else having problems with the internet?’ Or ‘How long has that mince pie been sitting there?’

And what about the the discussion about Christmas trees and decorations? Lots of Christmas Trees come down at New Year I notice. Ours stays until 12th night. But when is that exactly? We go for the 5th January. And then what about the Crib, the Manger? The shepherds get a good long stay in ours, but the Wise Men only arrived on the 6th, the Feast of the Epiphany. They’ll stay till the end of today at least, though some keep the Crib until Candlemas, February 2nd the final point of the whole season of incarnation.

This outer framework of ritual gives a shape to what hopefully is going on inside. A life re-connected with the living God, God as he is in Jesus. As the carol puts it:

‘What can I give him, poor as I am?’
‘If I were a shepherd I would bring a lamb.
If I was a wise man I would do my part
But what I can I give him
Give my heart.’

Today we remember the Baptism of Christ. Jesus, now thirty years old, still unmarried. Jesus perhaps conscious of all he had been given in life, somehow knowing it was time to give something back. But not just something.... Everything. His journey in faith would cost him his life.

I wonder if you’ve been baptised, or Christened? If so can you say when and where that was? I was baptised on July 21st 1962 in Liverpool, St Mary the Virgin West Derby to be exact. I can’t remember much about it as I was less than a month old, but it was the start of my Christian journey.

I’ve baptised lots of people. Adults, children, and hundreds of babies! In the North East we used to do ten at a time, the church packed with families. Dads uncomfortable in rarely worn suits. Mums trying to avoid the baby being sick down their new dress. Grandparents, godparents, hordes of younger siblings and cousins. Crowd control was key!
I found if I brought in a large jar of lollipops.... silence would come. Children came to the front, took a lolly and said thank you. As they went back to suck their sweets I knew I had 3 minutes of quiet for a message.

We were there to say Thank you, just as the children had done. Thank you for each child coming for baptism, and thank you for the gift of life itself. A gift, and not a posession.

The gift of life and the gift of love. The parents gave love to their newborn children in all kinds of practical ways. That can be wonderful and really hard too for new parents. Giving love and care through tears and sleepless nights. God loves and cares for us his children even when we are difficult, or needy, or when we don’t even acknowledge he is there. But then what about the moment when a baby first looks gives their first smile? You’re not always sure at first, but soon its as clear as day. That look of recognition. That delight in the eyes. It’s a wonderful feeling. The moment when love becomes a two way thing.

God is the father of all people. He loves every man, woman and child on this planet always and forever. However much we ignore him, God loves us still. But how wonderful, how all together more rewarding when we look up at God and smile. That’s what worship is really. When love becomes a two way thing. When we come to God and say thank you. When we come to God with our joys and sorrows, with our good things and our bad things, and know its OK. When we turn to him and smile then life changes. The two way relationship begins to sing, and the journey starts afresh.

‘I am the Lord, I have called you in righteousness, I have taken you by the hand and kept you; I have given you as a light to the nations.’

Jill Saward died this week, aged just 51. Thirty years ago she had been brutally attacked and raped by men who had broken into the house where she lived with her parents. The trauma was appalling of course, made worse by the intrusive press, and the insensitive judge at her trial who dared to say that her suffering had not been that great. Gradually she got her life together again, married and had three children. But as a baptised Christian she wanted to do more. With confidence, compassion and creativity she worked tirelessly to raise the issue of sexual violence and with others did so much to change the way that the press, the police and the judges treated its survivors.

Jill followed in the footseps of God’s servant people throughout the ages. Called out in our reading today, they are like the bruised reeds that do not
break... Dimly burning perhaps but never quenched. They do not ‘faint or become crushed until justice is established in the earth.’

So today, as we remember our baptism, we can look up at our Father God and smile as love become a two way thing! And as we go back to work, or to wherever our life takes us this year, we take strength from the confidence, compassion and creativity of Christians like Jill Saward as we pledge ourselves anew to live for Christ. For:

When the song of the angels is stilled,

When the star in the sky is gone,

When the kings and princes are home,

When the shepherds are back with their flocks –

The work of Christmas begins:

To find the lost,

To heal the broken,

To feed the hungry,

To release the prisoner,

To rebuild the nations,

To bring peace among the people,

To make music in the heart.