8 December 2019: Choral Eucharist
The Second Sunday of Advent
Isaiah 11:1–10, Romans 15:4–13, Matthew 3:1–12
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Words of John the Baptist from this morning’s gospel: ‘I baptize you with water for repentance; but one who is more powerful than I is coming after me…’

In nomine…

How much do you remember about your baptism? I guess for most of us the answer is nothing at all, unless you were a relative latecomer to the household of faith, baptised as an older child or adult. I was baptized at around this time of the year – the 12th December 1971 to be precise, in St James the Less, Pangbourne, thirty miles or so down the Thames from here. But, as I was less than three months old at the time, I remember the date only because it is engraved on the silver candlestick that my Great Aunt Helen gave me as a christening present. I imagine the same is true for most of us. It is through the memories of parents and godparents, through photographs and christening gifts, that we remember the occasion of our entry into the Church at baptism.

In today’s gospel, we encounter the ministry of the enigmatic figure who stands at the beginning of all four gospels: John the Baptist. John makes his own the words of the prophet Isaiah: ‘Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight.’ As has often been said, John the Baptist is the lynchpin between the OT and the NT. John sees himself as the last in the long line of prophets of the OT, and much of what he says and does could come straight out of its pages. But it’s worth remembering that the baptisms he carries out – baptisms by total immersion in the River Jordan – were actually something of a novelty. They are not without precedent – Naaman in the second book of Kings is healed when he bathes seven times in the Jordan – but baptism of this sort was by no means standard practice in first-century Palestine. Yet, even in that very traditional society, the novel baptism that John offered seems to have been highly popular. The gospels describe it as ‘a baptism in token of repentance.’ In other words, it is a baptism that follows the confession of sins. It is the spiritual equivalent of a really good scrub and brush-up, a
bath after a hard afternoon’s gardening or a particularly muddy game of rugby. John’s baptism symbolizes the thorough washing away of sins, through confession and divine forgiveness.

But that sort of baptism – general adult baptism as practised by John – is not the same as the baptism we receive as Christians. And that’s not only because Christian baptism is given to babies and children as well as adults. Think of John’s own words: ‘I baptize you with water for repentance, but one who is more powerful than I is coming after me, …he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire.’ That tells us clearly that Christian baptism is not just about the washing away of sins, however thoroughly. It is about that, of course; but more importantly, it’s about death and resurrection: the death and resurrection of Christ, without sharing in which we cannot be his disciples. In other words, in the traditional language of the Church, baptism is a sacrament.

To say that baptism is a sacrament is to say that it is not just a human invention, but a mystery that shows us something of God. Baptism is not a service offered by me as a priest; it’s not even a service offered collectively by the Church; instead it is a gift of God. As a gift, it is offered personally, just as Christ offered himself personally, ‘once and for all.’ That’s why, whenever possible, Christian baptism and the eucharist belong together. They are the two great sacraments at the heart of our faith. In them God comes to meet us personally: in these sacraments, through faith, God acts directly in our lives.

In a sceptical age, talk of God acting directly can sound, at best, unlikely. But the point about belief in God is that by it we affirm the reality of something outside ourselves. Belief in God doesn’t involve being trapped with some childish image of a bearded old man in the clouds. What it does involve is a commitment to the belief that we are not our own creators: human beings, our faith teaches us, are not the be all and end all: instead we find our being and look forward to our end in God. When we truly believe that, what a difference it makes to how we think of ourselves and of the human race at large; what dignity it gives us, but also what responsibility.

Christianity rightly claims to be the true humanism, because it sees humanity as a gift held in being by the love of God. ‘He will baptize with the Holy Spirit and with fire,’ says John. The fire he talks of is the same fire that Moses saw, when he turned aside at the sight of the burning bush, and recognised the place where he was standing as holy ground. In baptism, we turn aside and see God at work in us, recognising that our whole human nature, body and soul, is the holy ground where God comes to dwell.
So, though we may not individually remember the occasion of our christening, our baptism is the beginning of our conscious relationship with God. It is the point when we, through our godparents, first respond to the love of God in us. So every baptism, like every celebration of communion, is an occasion not just of joy, but of awe. God first pitched his tent among us in the divine humanity of his Son, Jesus Christ, but, in our baptism we share fully in all that Jesus was and is – in his death and in his glorious resurrection. Baptized with the Holy Spirit and with fire, we should expect to share the gifts of the Spirit that Isaiah proclaimed: ‘the spirit of wisdom and understanding, the spirit of counsel and might, the spirit of knowledge and the fear of the Lord’, so that our ‘delight may be in the fear of the Lord.’

In baptism God calls us by name to recognise our place as his beloved children and to know that alongside our immediate family, we now have a home in the great family that we call the Church. A family in which all are one: male and female, rich and poor, living and departed – and, one should take care to add this week, Leave and Remain. A family not divided against itself, but always willing to embrace and include…

_ O Lord, raise up, we pray, your power and come among us, and with great might succour us; that whereas, through our sins and wickedness we are grievously hindered in running the race that is set before us, your bountiful grace and mercy may speedily help and deliver us… _