

## **St. Bride's Church of Scotland, Newtonmore**

**Rev. Catherine Buchan**

### **BELOVED**

**11<sup>th</sup> January 2015**

Isaiah 43:1-7

Matthew 3:13-17

Imagine that you are Jesus, just about to leave your life as a joiner, and set out into the completely uncharted waters of, well of being you, of being God's Son, of ministry to the people. What would you feel? You might be excited: after all, you have always known that this day would come, that at the right time you would leave the ordinary life and plough your own furrow. You might be afraid – for exactly the same reasons. The Jesus I meet in the gospels is not the serene, always certain man of popular conception – the man who always knew what he was going to do and how it was going to work, and who had no worries. If he had been like that, the disciples would not have had so hard a time working out who he really was.

It was because Jesus was fully human, was just like us, with all our emotional reactions to life, that it took so long for people to realise who they were dealing with. And s when Jesus was about to begin his ministry, I expect he felt all the things that any of us might feel when taking such a decisive step. I expect he was excited and frightened. I expect he wondered if he was up to it, whatever it was. I expect he wondered if the way he sort of intended to go about things was the right way, and if anyone would pay any attention to him. And because he was doing what he was doing in response to the call of God, I expect that he wondered if he were going to live up to God's expectations.

And then he comes to the river and asks John to baptise him. John doesn't want to do it. John knows that baptism is for repentance, for turning away from what is wrong and turning towards God; and he knows that Jesus has nothing to repent of, he lives his life already fully turned towards God. But it is no part of Jesus' plan to mark himself out as superior to others. He wants to show that he is just like us. He wants people to know that they too can begin with repentance and live lives which like his are fully turned towards God. He has deliberately planned to begin his ministry where everyone needs to start a life with God – by showing his allegiance.

So John baptises him. And a voice comes from heaven. “This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased.” Wasn't that just what Jesus needed to hear! He didn't need instruction, he needed affirmation. He needed to know that he was loved by God, and God told him. And so his ministry began. No one knew then just how it would work out – Jesus himself did not, though he might have suspicions that in general it would not end with retirement. But God affirmed Jesus as his Son, the Beloved, not when he went to the cross, at the end of his ministry, but at the beginning, before he had proved himself, when, being fully human as he was, there was always the possibility that he might not remain faithful, that he might turn aside.

It is not easy to imagine that we are Jesus, because few of us seek to live such radically different lives as he did, few of us have such a calling. But all of us need to hear what he needed to hear.

All of us need to know that we are affirmed. We seek it in all sorts of ways. Children seek affirmation from their parents, they need to know that Mum and Dad love them and approve of them – and they continue to need this even long after they are grown up and have left home. One of the reasons that the death of a parent is so hard for so many is that now a source of love and affirmation is gone, now there is one less person in the world that you can count on to be on your side.

We need affirmation. We need to be affirmed, not just for what we do, but for who we are. We seek it in family relationships, in friendships, with work colleagues, with our neighbours. If these people fail us, or if their affirmation is in some way not enough, then the search for affirmation can lead people into some very strange places – dangerous places, doing things that they know are wrong, because that way they believe there is someone who will approve of them. Much of the evil that is done in the world is done because people think that in acting in such a way they will impress and gain the approval of this group or that.

What God offered at Jesus baptism was a perfect love. It was not a love that was dependant on what he did, or on anyone else's approval. God looked on Jesus and named him Beloved. The greatest of the gifts that Jesus gives us is that this love of God, this naming of his Son as Beloved, also extends to us. God also looks at you and at me and says “This is, you are the Beloved.” No conditions, no need for the approval of others, not because of what you do, but because of who you are: you are his son or his daughter, and God calls you Beloved.

Chances are you don't really believe that. Not really. Chances are you think that these are nice words, but they don't really apply to you. Most of us don't really believe it about ourselves, or if we say we do, our lives give the lie. Most of us spend a lot of our lives running away from ourselves, in self-rejection. “I'm not good enough” we say – not good enough to love ourselves, so not good enough to be loved for being ourselves, not by others, and not by God. “I'm not good enough. If you really knew what I am like, you wouldn't say that I am beloved.” When this is our escape from the truth of God's love, then any time that someone crosses you, or rebukes you, or disagrees with you you will take it as an endorsement of your view. You are not good enough – see, here is someone who doesn't think I am perfect.

But God does not name you Beloved because you are prefect. He does not love you because of what you have done, or not done. He loves you because you are his child.

Those who do not run away in self-rejection run away in the opposite direction, in arrogance. Arrogance is when you put yourself on a pedestal – you put yourself there in case no one else puts you there. You stand on your self-appointed pedestal so that you can distract others, but mainly so that you can distract yourself from what you fear is the truth about you: that you are at bottom unlovable. And yet you are the Beloved.

The people who understand this are not the noisy people, needing to draw attention to themselves, so that people will see what they want them to see. They are not the worried, self-deprecating people, always putting themselves down so that no one else can do it for them. To be self-deprecating is not, as some think, to embody the Christian virtue of humility. Humility knows its value in God's eyes and nothing else matters.

To know ourselves as Beloved is our best way into being genuinely humble people. Humility is not false modesty, it is knowing our place in the world and not worrying about what the world thinks. Jesus came as one of us, being baptised as one of us, so that we could be children of

God, so that we could be beloved by God. If we know that about ourselves, really know it, then it will affect how we react to all of life.

If you know yourself to be Beloved by God you will hold on to that truth when it seems the world is against you. When misfortune happens, when you face illness or unexpected reverses, or tragedy in your own life or in the life of someone whom you care about, God's beloved children are able to remind themselves that what really matters is that God loves them, that God affirms them. When things go well and the world is inclined to smile on you, when people speak well of you (something Jesus warned about taking too seriously) and life is turning out just as it seems it ought to, God's beloved children are able to remind themselves that what really matters is that God loves them, that God affirms them. And that is humility, that knowledge of what matters, that so-rare lack of need to think about yourself, either with loathing or with pride, but to allow God's loving to be enough.

I am sure that when Jesus went from the river into the wilderness to pray and plan and meet with both God and the Satan, which means the accuser, it was the knowledge that God already had named him, claimed him as his beloved Son which helped him to keep focussed on what really mattered – worshipping God, serving God, obeying God. The accusations of the Satan, accusations that say “If you are really... God's Son... good enough .... saved .... worth knowing,” all the accusations and doubt that come to us at midnight, or in trouble, or when we want to try to serve God, these are all put to rest by being able to turn from looking at ourselves, and resting on the affirmation of God. You are not good enough, or worthy, or anything else, and nor am I, not in ourselves. But God has chosen you, and me, and has chosen us not in a way that excludes others but that wants us to bring others also into the circle of his love. God has chosen us and knowing that he loves us for ourselves, for being his children turns the focus from ourselves to him, and so the accusations and doubts can simply dwindle away.

When we baptise infants in this church I say to the child:

For you Jesus Christ came into the world:  
for you he lived and showed God's love:  
for you he suffered the darkness of Calvary and cried at the last “it is accomplished”;  
for you he triumphed over death and rose in newness of life;  
for you he ascended to reign at God's right hand.  
All this he did for you, although you do not know it yet.

And so the Scripture is fulfilled: “We love because God first loved us.”

What we are doing in this act of baptism is just what God did for Jesus at the Jordan. We are naming the child beloved of God, despite her not having yet done anything to deserve that love. Our response, as the words of our ritual say, quoting the apostle Paul, is because of God's unconditional love. Because God loves us we try to live for him, not to earn that love. Because God names us as his own, we want to make that belonging the most important thing in our lives. Because God calls us Beloved, the whole of life can gain its proper perspective and we can walk in his footsteps without fear.

“Do not fear,” says God through his prophet, “for I have redeemed you. I have called you by our name, you are mine.” (Isaiah 43:1)

May that conviction grow in you and affirm you more each day, as you follow the one whose love gave everything for you. Amen.