

St. Bride's Church of Scotland, Newtonmore

Rev. Catherine Buchan

THROUGH THE WATERS

10th January 2016

Isaiah 43:1-7

Luke 3:15-17, 21-22

“Do not fear” says God to his people, in our reading from Isaiah. Do not fear. It is one of the commonest things that God or his messengers says to us. Do not fear. Because we do fear. We fear all sorts of things. We fear accidents to ourselves or to others, we fear illness, we fear death, we fear change, we fear poverty, we fear inconvenience, we fear spiders or the dark. The range of things of which we can be afraid is vast, almost endless, and it covers things from the trivial – or what seem trivial to those who do not share the fear – spiders, dogs, mice – to the most profound things of life. We do fear, but God tells us not to.

Isaiah was speaking to a people who feared that their exile would go on for ever, that there was no future for their nation. And no one could ever blame them for being afraid in these circumstances. We might think that we don't care about our country, about our nation or even our nationality. Many of us don't give it a moment's thought. But go and live abroad for any length of time. Go and take up residence – not just make a visit – in another country and suddenly you will find that you are a lot more Scottish or whatever you are, than you had realised. If nothing else your new friends and neighbours will make you realise it as they expect you to represent your country, to show them what its average citizen looks like. (I don't know how many Americans who met me came away with the idea that all Scots prefer to drink hot water!) Get away, and your nation matters. Be forced out, as the Israelites were, and it matters even more. So the thought that your land is overrun by foreigners who have devastated your homes and other holy places and have done away with your customs, and that you might never get back there yourself, and that if you do it will be all spoiled, that is a big and heart-rending fear.

In some ways it is the fear that people around us, people all over Europe have when they see the Syrian and Afghan refugees streaming across the continent. These are people who are not like us, who have different customs from us, a different religion from many of us, and if we let them in they will change everything and nothing will ever be the same again. That, at least, is the fear, And with it is the fear that if they come the appalling violence from which they flee will pursue them, or come with them, and we will know the same devastation as grieves us in the Middle East. That is the fear.

“Do not fear” says God. *Do not fear. I have called you by your name, and you are mine. When you pass through the waters, I will be with you.* Passing through the waters can mean so many things. This week, though fortunately not for us in this village, it has meant the flood waters which have risen up to sweep away roads and bridges, to ruin homes and businesses, to challenge communities and devastate individuals. Watching, as we have been able to do from the comfort of dry homes, we

have seen the sheer power of water, which seems unstoppable. Roads swept away, railways mangled, an ancient castle toppling on the brink of a new cliff-face and so on. But God says *when you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and through rivers, they shall not overwhelm you.*

The people of Israel thought of passing through the waters as the flight from Egypt through the Red Sea, or as the entry into the promised land, through the river Jordan. These were foundational stories in their understanding of who they were, and in their understanding of how God loved and provided for them, even when it seemed that there was nothing that could be done, and nowhere to go. Passing through the waters meant changes, and we fear changes, especially if we are not in control of them. Passing through the waters meant and means accepting God's care and entering into his promises. It was what John and the people who came to him had in mind when they were baptised in the Jordan. They were going from wilderness to a new land, coming into the Kingdom of God.

When Jesus came to be baptised he was showing his allegiance to God, and his desire to live within God's kingdom. His baptism, just like ours, was in one sense his entry into God's family. When our human children grow up and leave home, we hope that they will still feel the tie of family and come back to us. But they don't have to. And when Jesus came to earth God hoped that he would continue to want to do things in God's way to redeem the world. But he didn't have to – the temptations in the wilderness show us that. However in his baptism Jesus is showing his intent of being a proper member of God's kingdom, God's family, and so God names him then as his Son. He passed through the waters and God was with him.

But it is not only the waters, those frontiers of change, in which God is with us. He promises his people that *when you walk through fire you shall not be burned and the flame shall not consume you.* The fire stands not so much for changes and new beginnings, as for trials and purification. The people to whom Isaiah spoke and their parents, had known the trials of war and defeat, the trials of being forced into exile, the trials of persecution and fear for the present, not just for the future. They had known at first hand what we now think of as terrorism – that which strikes terror in the soul.

There are Christians today who are going through the fire. Christians in the Middle East, those who are left and have not fled in terror. Christians in Pakistan or in parts of India, Christians in parts of Nigeria, and in South Sudan still, though we do not always hear of it. They go through the fire of persecution and they live in fear.

Our fire is not theirs, and for that we should give thanks, even as we stand with them in prayer, and where we can, speak up for them to those who can make a difference. Our trials are different. There are those who are offended by the very fact that the church continues to exist in this twenty-first century, though I usually think that those who express the deepest disgust at our faith are those who secretly suspect that there is something in it. If you really don't believe in something you are able just to ignore it – and many do, of course.

For many of us the trials of our faith, the fire though which we walk, are personal. They are the things which happen which rock our faith, which make us question what it is all about and if it is worth it and if it is true. Personal disasters and losses, or things which happen in the wider world but which we cannot begin to understand or find any hint of

good in, they do rock our faith, if we are thinking people, even, especially, if we are praying people. God has not promised us a life free from the fire of trials, and we should not expect it. But he has said he will be with us within them, and this we can expect even when our prayers are full of anguish and questions.

The other kind of fire is the fire of purification. It hurts just as much, it burns in the same way, but its effect is to purify our faith, to get rid of the dross in our lives, to make us more fit to be God's children. It can come in illness, or in sudden changes in life; it can come with family problems, with any pain which forces us to rid our lives of inessentials and in the end brings us closer to God – often because we have nowhere else to turn. And in that fire God will be with us, that is his promise.

It is the promise which has held Christians to their faith in the most fiery of trials, the most purging of circumstances. When we read or hear of the terrible things that Christians elsewhere face – from loss of job and home to beheadings and systematic rape, we may wonder – I certainly do – how we would cope in such circumstances. What would I do? Would I keep the faith? When I face these questions, which are real, my hope comes from the testimony of those who have been there. Through their tears they attest to knowing God's presence, to finding his love. For instance, An Egyptian Christian reflected on the way he was treated when he converted to Christ, saying:

"In great suffering you discover a different Jesus than you do in normal life... Pain and suffering bring up to the surface all the weak points of your personality. In my weakest state, I had an incredible realization that Jesus loved me even right then."

And a Christian widow from Iran said:

"I only had hatred in my heart for my enemies who had murdered my husband. But one day a miracle happened. God taught me how I could love my enemies... I had been praying for this, even though on the deepest level I didn't want it to happen. Gradually, through a process of ups and downs, God answered this prayer."

One of the things that is noticeable about what the Christians who are going through the fire ask, when they ask us to pray for them, is that they do not ask for us to pray for the trials to be taken from them, but that they would be strong within them.

When Jesus was baptised in the River Jordan, the voice from heaven named him as God's beloved. When God spoke through Isaiah to those who were afraid of flood and fire and all that they stand for he said "You are precious in my sight and honoured and I love you."

God loves us and he gives us his Spirit, in just the same way that he loved and gave his Spirit to Jesus. No matter what the flood of change, or potential change, no matter what the fire of trials or of purification, that knowledge alone should enable us to stand up and shout for joy, to stand up and be counted as those who also love our Lord, to stand up and shine as lights within a world where fear so often extinguishes the light. Changes happen and life is never the same. But God's love for us and for you is eternal and immovable. May that knowledge keep you from fear and lead you forward in faith and hope. Amen.