

Living Our Baptism

A sermon by Revd Richard Carter

Readings: Ephesians 1.3-14; Mark 6.14-29

Today at this Eucharist we will celebrate the joyful baptism of Sherlock. Every time I mention his name it has brought a smile of delight. What a wonderful name and what a wonderful miracle of new life Sherlock is himself, with, I am told, a fine pair of lungs too. And today, as I was given the privilege of both preaching and baptising Sherlock, it was with a sinking heart that I discovered that the Gospel reading for the day was the beheading of John the Baptist. How does one link that horror with this baptism and wonderful new life? "I'm afraid the Gospel for the day is the beheading of John the Baptist," I told Tarra, Sherlock's mother, on the phone. "Don't worry," she said with her infectious laughter, "our wedding day took place on the Massacre of the Holy Innocents. I guess that goodness and life and love have the power to overcome." Tarra should know because the first few weeks of Sherlock's life were not easy. Tarra has already learnt the costliness of a mother's love. A week after Sherlock's birth she had to be rushed back into hospital and described to me the terrible fear she felt of losing her own life, not because she feared death, but because she feared not being able to look after Sherlock. But alongside that fear and panic I know from Tarra that there has also been another force at work, the Spirit of life and love and hope. There has been Tarra's husband Prith's absolute love and devotion, he was there when I visited them feeding us plates of biscuits and cakes. And there were the three of them: mother, father and son – like a trinity of love – and I was not sure who was giving life to whom but I was certain that all three were inseparable, totally interdependent. All three, I know have been upheld by the love of so many family and friends. "They are like angels helping us through this time."

Actually, when we think about it more deeply, baptism is not simply sugar and spice and all things nice, it is a celebration of new life – resurrection and hope, but a hope which is born in the waters of chaos. As Paul graphically describes it is a symbol both of dying and being raised with Christ – going through the waters of death – a new birth of water and Spirit. And the knowledge of that new life comes in the recognition of its opposite – the darkness and the fear and our mortal frailty, and all that threatens to put out the light and love of God.



The Road to Emmaus, Caravaggio, National Gallery, www.nationalgallery.org.uk



Salome receives the head of John the Baptist, Caravaggio, National Gallery, www.nationalgallery.org.uk

I remember when we took my young nephew and niece to see Caravaggio's famous painting *The Road to Emmaus* at the National Gallery. It depicts the startling moment when the two disciples at the table recognise the risen Christ in the breaking of bread. Yet as I tried to direct my nephew towards this painting of the resurrection – his young head was turned to the left and his eyes grew

wider – because the canvas on the left, also by Caravaggio, showed Salome with the head of John the Baptist on a silver platter, his executioner holding John's head by the hair. It was hard to win back Francis' attention. "What's that?" my nephew asked. "Why have they cut his head off?" This picture, *Salome receives the Head of John the Baptist* is on loan in Montpelier at the moment just in case you too go looking for it. There is horror for us all in the image of decapitation – the head, all that gives expression and dignity, sight, sense and voice to the body, now severed – the execution mocking human life – taunting us with our own mortality. Throughout history beheading has been used as method of instilling fear and humiliating one's enemy. The traitor's head spiked on the gate, severed from power, a warning. How removed this seems from our lives. Or is it? Today's headline reads "Over 200 feared dead in Syrian attack in Tremseh", with activists talking of the horror of an artillery bombardment followed by executions. The news is full of accusation and counter-accusation. What is not in doubt is that terrible acts of brutality have been committed. Brutal violence has a long history, a momentum and power of its own. But what about the force for peace, the Christ force, the goodness of God, does that not have a power also? What about those words from the Benedictus that I preached about only a few weeks ago when Zechariah's lips opened up after he had been struck dumb and he acknowledged the wonder of a God who fulfilled his promises? "Blessed be the Lord the God of Israel who has come to his people to set them free." What about the tender compassion of God breaking upon us which shines on those dwelling in darkness which will guide our feet into the way of peace? Could he still have sung out that prayer of thanksgiving if he knew the death that awaited his son? How do we move our eyes back from Caravaggio's beheading of John the Baptist to the recognition of Christ's resurrection?

Our Gospel leads us on that very journey. At first this flashback story of John the Baptist's beheading seems as if it has been inserted into Mark Chapter Six with no logical connection to the theme that has gone before or comes after. The story it follows is the story of Jesus commissioning and sending out his twelve disciples to participate radically in his mission. Jesus calls them to let go of securities, "take nothing with you," he commands them, "no bread, no bag, no money in your belts. Trust yourself to the welcome you receive, if you receive no welcome, shake off the dust and move on." What Jesus demands from the disciples here is the next step of faith – the move from observation, being mere questioners, to becoming part of the work of God themselves. They are called, just as Mark knew that the early church was being called, to embody the mission of Christ themselves: to bring about the kingdom of God, to preach repentance, to drive out demons, to heal the sick. Jesus calls them to extend his own mission and he gives them the power to do it. And so, two by two, they are sent out.

And it is at this point, sandwiched between this sending out and their return that we have today's Gospel. First Herod's fear of the rumour that in Jesus' mission some were saying that John the Baptist had been raised from the dead and then the flashback to the whole gruesome and sordid story of how John was beheaded. The story of the death of John the Baptist is the first part of Mark's Gospel that does not have Jesus at its centre. This is because Mark is using this story of John to show us something essential about discipleship, that following Jesus will cost not less than everything. One cannot simply dip one's toe in the water and test the temperature to see if it is too cold; faith is the call to follow Jesus into the water and swim. Time and time again the love of Christ will come into confrontation with the full horror of all that opposes that goodness. John's story is the prelude to the passion of Christ. John is put to death by a ruler who recognises his goodness but succumbs to public pressure, and so will Jesus be put to death. John speaks truth to power and pays the ultimate price for the truth he speaks, and so will Jesus. John is the prophet who points the way to the one who comes after.

In this story there is no mistaking the horrifying power of human complicity in evil. The story of John's death is extreme but recognisable: Herodias' jealousy infecting her daughter with malignity, Herod's pride and reputation more important than the loss of an innocent life. Such squalid betrayal lives on – the fear of losing face, the fear of standing up for the falsely accused, the fear of

speaking out for the victim when faced by the majority, the fear for our own reputation, that we will be tarred with the same brush as the scapegoat. As history has proven time and time again, how easy it is to become caught up in the dance of death – the spiral of violence, fear and obsession which puts to death the love of God. “Blessed are those who are persecuted for the cause of righteousness sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.”

So the interlude with John the Baptist is over, and the bread on the other side of this Markan sandwich is the story of the disciples returning to Jesus almost triumphantly to gather around him and to tell him all that they have done and taught. They are flushed with the first successes of missionary zeal. But we know that for these disciples this is only just the beginning. They tell Jesus what they have done, but without Jesus they can do nothing. We have been given an insight into the struggle to come which will take them to the cross and know that when the going gets tough they will scatter in confusion and fear. At the centre of all this is Jesus who is the one who goes before them calling them ever deeper into faith, the one who in the Gospel will walk ahead of them, leading them ultimately even beyond his own death. “Do not be afraid you are looking for Jesus of Nazareth who was crucified he has been raised... he is not here. He has gone ahead of you.”

Gemma from our congregation is a person who has known struggle and despair. This week she sent me a book that she has written, with these words at the beginning:

“In the depths of depression we die
Our ego dies, our hope dies
And in this death we are reborn.
Emptying ourselves of our ego can let God into the depths of our soul
This Easter story of resurrection begins many times over
Where breakdown becomes breakthrough and we are born again and again from above.”

God calls us to go beyond our fear, through the waters of the unknown, through chaos and struggle and opposition, to have our lives transformed by Christ. Perhaps we glimpsed for a moment something of the enormity and wonder of that journey yesterday in our Parish ‘At Home’ Day, with a call that is to more than simply being open minded and accepting, a calling beyond questions to the mission entrusted by God’s grace to all those who are called. This calling will lead us inevitably to confront some of our own demons and darkneses, the injustices of our lives and of our world.

This is of course is the baptismal journey that in a moment we will hear again:
God’s call out of darkness into his marvellous light. Today with beloved Sherlock we will once again be asked these questions:
Do you turn to Christ?
Do you repent of your sins?
Do you renounce evil?

Dear Sherlock and all who have gathered here today, we do not do this alone.
You have been clothed by Christ.
In the prayer of today’s service we will pray:
We who are baptised into Christ have put on Christ. May God pour upon you the riches of his mercy and grace, that within the company of God’s pilgrim people we may daily be renewed by his anointing Spirit. Amen.