

Baptism of Christ 2015 “While”

When we looked at the reading from Acts together last week, the word that jumped out at me - surprisingly - was ‘while’. **While** Apollos was in Corinth, Paul went to Ephesus, found some disciples, discovered that they hadn’t received the full baptism of Jesus, baptised them, and saw them receive the Holy Spirit in a powerful way.

What was Apollos doing in Corinth? We don’t know. He might have been working with the church there, or having a well earned rest, or doing a few jobs - getting his sandals repaired and his toga washed. He certainly wasn’t aware of what was going on on the other side of the Aegean.

Life is like that. Something very dramatic may be happening in one place - something very wonderful - or very terrible - and meanwhile the rest of the world gets on with their ordinary lives. We’re often made particularly aware of that when the news is full of the sort of events that sadly took place in France this week.

There’s a famous picture by the painter Breugel which shows a country scene - a man ploughing, a shepherd staring into space, another man fishing, and out at sea a boat sailing into harbour, and - if you look very carefully - a small detail - a pair of legs disappearing into the sea.

It’s called ‘Landscape with the fall of Icarus’. This is the very moment from the Greek legend when Icarus, having made his wings and flown too close to the sun, plummets to his death - but no one notices - life goes on.

W. H. Auden wrote a poem about it:

About suffering they were never wrong,
The Old Masters: how well they understood
Its human position; how it takes place
While someone else is eating or opening a window or just
walking dully along;
How, when the aged are reverently, passionately waiting
For the miraculous birth, there always must be
Children who did not specially want it to happen, skating
On a pond at the edge of the wood.

It’s not just suffering - in the background of pictures of the birth of Jesus there may be - as he says - children skating, or a woman serving beer in the tavern, or someone asleep. ‘How silently, how silently, the wondrous gift is given’ - and meanwhile the rest of the world gets on with its life.

Sometimes we feel all too aware of this contrast. Here am I, walking along a wet windy street in Codsall and while I'm doing that, other people are lying on a warm sunny beach in the Maldives...

But this can also be a choice. As some of you know, our son Ben flew out to Madagascar this week to begin work with a charity there for 6 months or a year. So quite often Sarah & I find ourselves thinking 'I wonder what Ben is doing now' while we are getting on with our lives here. And perhaps he is thinking 'While I am in this amazing, interesting and challenging place I could have been still sitting working in that office in Birmingham'.

Ben decided that he wanted move from the ordinary part of the picture to the part that shows something different and amazing, and he's been lucky enough to manage to do it. Paul took the decision to leave Apollos doing his laundry in Corinth, and go to Ephesus. In our gospel reading, some of the people from Jerusalem took the decision to leave the city, probably leaving other things unfinished, and go out to see this strange new prophet who spoke a truth that gripped them and offered a new beginning with God. And while other people were sitting over their midday meals back in the city they were being immersed into something new and discovering a new depth in their lives.

Jesus also made a choice - the choice to leave the carpenter's bench where he had worked for the last 10 or 15 years - to walk out of the house he shared with his family, to walk away from his home town, his friends and his daily routine, and to accept this moment of baptism into all he truly was and would be, into his father's love and call. Meanwhile many of those on the river bank saw only another ordinary person coming to be washed, and others were busy drying their clothes or having a picnic, and his friends at home were getting on with their Monday morning lives.

Perhaps there is an invitation in this gospel reading for us too - one that we are accepting as we come here today. An invitation to step out from our day to day lives and to seek out this deeper level of living. Here at church, while other people are washing the car or reading the papers - or still fast asleep - we are sharing together in the profound mystery of God's love for us - we are facing who we are and our need for forgiveness - we are hearing words of mercy and love and promise - we are coming to receive the bread of life and the cup of salvation - we are being reformed into God's own people, ready to go out and live our lives in a new way.

Have you ever had the experience of being with lots of other people and feeling that no one can see everything that is going on inside you? I think that sometimes it can feel like that, living with bereavement. Sometimes it can feel like that as well, being in love. I remember experiencing something like this, walking along the road to

college on the morning after Ben had been born, carrying this great excitement and joy inside me which I felt sure that people should be able to see.

Sometimes our experience of being with God can be like that. If we have been given a moment when we felt the presence of our Lord, or known his love holding us, or his peace filling us - in a special place or time or just in the middle of things - we feel different, we know that something of great significance has happened to us. Perhaps you can think of a time when this has happened for you.

Those moments, however brief, can have a lasting effect. It's as if time alters - like when the children in the story go through the wardrobe into the land of Narnia, and have amazing and life changing experiences - and when they come back, no time seems to have passed at all. But they know that they are different.

And we may not need to have an experience like that to be changed. In his great poem about prayer, George Herbert says that prayer is 'heaven in ordinary'. Allowing ourselves to walk through our ordinary lives more closely with God - stopping every now and then to glance upwards, or inwards, as it were, and remember God's presence - making a conscious effort to open the door of each day to our Lord - this can change our everyday experience.

Even while we are doing the ordinary things, we can become more aware of the wonder of life, of the miracle of each day, of the beauty of the world around us, and of the incredible preciousness of each human being and of all our relationships.

This is a different sort of 'while'. It is not one very humdrum thing happening while another very wonderful thing is going on. It is living in such a way that the ordinary becomes tinged with heaven, so that while we are open to God we see the world in a new and wonderful way, and while we are in our day to day world, we know God is with us in a deeper and more real way. It is being baptised in the Spirit so that our eyes are washed clear and our hearts are made new, and we are more able to see the glory of God which is all around us.

Lord, baptise us with your grace,
baptise us with your love,
baptise us with your Spirit,
so that we may be immersed in your presence
today and every day
for your glory's sake.

Amen.