

Sermon for Morning Prayer on the Baptism of Christ (Sunday 13 January 2019) - *Mike Fox*

Isaiah 43:1-7

Restoration and Protection Promised

Acts 8:14-17

Philip Preaches in Samaria

Luke 3:15-17, 21-22

The Proclamation of John the Baptist; the Baptism of Jesus

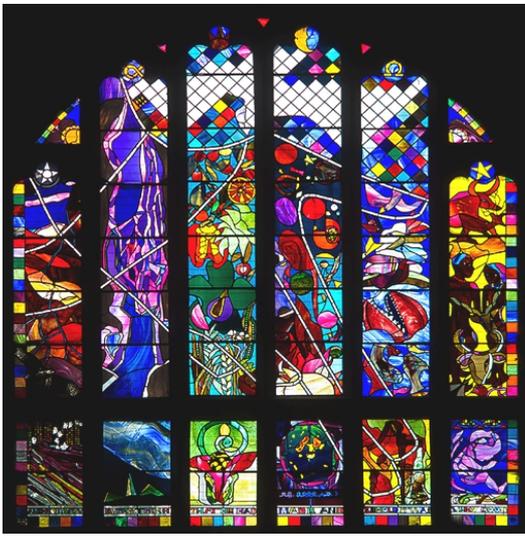
In our Parish Communion service that we hold at 9:30 on a Sunday Morning, there are two main parts, the first being the Ministry of the Word and the second being the Ministry of the Sacrament. I sometimes refer to them as Word and Table; we gather first around the book and the living Word of God and then around the Table as we remember the Last Supper of Jesus with his disciples on the night before he was tried, flogged and put to death on the cross; a selfless act that inspires us to this day. During the seasons of Christmas and Epiphany, we recall the Word being *“made flesh and living among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father’s only son, full of grace and truth” [John 1:14]*. In the book of Genesis, which John is echoing, the Word is all important. God spoke into being all that was created, and that Word continues with us now; we speak in our doxologies to the psalms and the canticles: *“as it was in the beginning, is now and shall be for ever”* – the Word deserves our praise today just as much as God always has.

As we try out a new pattern of worship here at St.Nicholas, we are expanding the first half of our usual service, the Ministry of the Word, and leaving the second half for another time; that is still available for those who would prefer it on the second and fourth Sundays, either earlier at 9 o’clock at St.Peter’s or later at the 11:15 service here. So, today we think about the work of the Word drawing people to the One who made us, God the Creator.

Last Thursday I popped into church to enjoy the quiet repetitive singing of Taizé chants and becoming close to God – it’s a good opportunity to be enveloped in the Word as we repeat simple words over and over again – one could even call it intoxicating. I followed that by joining the choir as they rehearsed the Anglican chants that we are trying out as part of the new Morning Prayer service – it takes time to get used to the method, but once we are used to it, the words will flow and we can explore the depths of the psalms more, something, some would say, we have neglected too much. We also tried an anthem by Grayston Ives using the words: *“O for a closer walk with God”*, very much the focus of our readings for today. It proved a little much to get sufficiently familiar with to perform today, but I’m sure it will be an attractive piece to listen to once the choir has tried it a few more times.

You will remember that there are two stories that start off the book of Genesis. The first one is from a Priestly source and speaks of the Word bringing things to life. Before that, the spirit of God blew across the face of the waters, the breath of life. Then God spoke and said: *“Let there be light”* and there was light; God said: *“Let the waters be divided, let there be lights in the sky, let the waters and the earth bring forth living creatures, let*





Millennium window, Chester cathedral refectory - *Six Days of Creation* created by Ros Grimshaw and installed in 2001

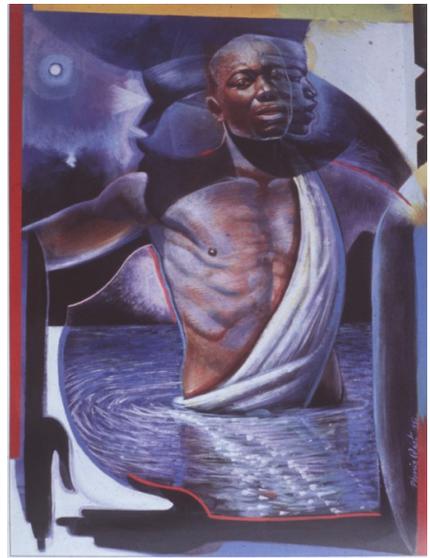
us make humankind in our image – and it was so” [Genesis 1:2,3,6,14,20,24,26] – it’s a marvellous story and tells how wonderful is our Creator. When our Priestly writer speaks of humankind, he deliberately links us with the divine, forming us in his own image; we are one with him and he is one with us. The same happens in the second story in Genesis 2, from a Jahwist source, but here the relationship is far closer and, after creating Adam and his fellow creatures [Genesis 2:18-20], God realises that Adam needed greater companionship and creates woman from the rib of man [Genesis 2:21-24]. Thus is the concept of community created and it includes God as he walks with them in the cool of the evening [Genesis 3:8], sharing life together ... then comes the fall and all that follows – the close communion

with the Lord is broken and we struggle to return. That is easy to see in our everyday existence too: people get to know each other and grow in trust and depth of sharing until suddenly, out of the blue, the wrong word is said, and it can take a lot of effort to return to the free-flowing conversations we once had. What we need continually is a word of forgiveness and that features right at the start of our worship, putting ourselves right with God again. We need to be honest and open to his Word just as we are to another when we turn again to forgive whatever wrong we have done. It’s not easy and we need to keep coming back to it.

What about the relationships with God that we find in our readings for today? The prophet Isaiah speaks again about how the Lord has “*created you, O Jacob and formed you, O Israel*” [Isaiah 43:1], echoes there of the creation stories in Genesis. Jacob is one of the patriarchs of the Jewish faith and Genesis describes how he wrestled with God all night and prevailed [Genesis 32:28 and 35:10]; it is then that he is renamed Israel, the father of the Jewish race, the Israelites. Isaiah refers back to this development recognising how Jacob had come to see God face to face, a very special condition that few people have the privilege to experience. Jacob is redeemed and, as Israel, he is called by name to be a child of God, to be his. Throughout the Old Testament we hear the cry: “*I will be your God if you will be my people*” and it defines the relationship that they have with their God. They often fail to live up to that command as they are distracted by other peoples and other gods, or idols, shadows of the one true God and the prophets seek to draw them back to the true heritage.

I asked the readers to read both the Isaiah and the Acts readings because the relationship changes once Jesus has visited us and sacrificed himself once for all upon the cross. He promised his disciples in the Upper Room on the night before he died that he would send his Holy Spirit to comfort, inspire and strengthen them to do his Will. This is done according to Luke’s record in the Acts of the Apostles by the laying on of hands, something that we continue to do at a confirmation service. It seems to me that this provides an alternative path to the Almighty – it doesn’t to my mind invalidate the Jewish approach, it just allows us to share with them the power of God’s Word; we are all people of the Book, just as are people of many faiths having their own scriptures to lead them to the source of life by whatever name they choose.

Our gospel reading tells of the ministry of John the Baptist turning people from their wicked ways and putting themselves right with God; they repent and become closer again to the divine through the symbolic entering the water and coming up anew, cleansed from their fallen condition. John was hesitant when Jesus came to him for baptism; he felt unworthy, as he saw who had come, but Jesus affirms him in his role as baptiser. Jesus recognises the Holy Spirit descending and drawing him close to his Father who spoke from heaven: *“You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.”* [Luke 3:22] We see the trinity of persons coming together in this one scene, and God the Father speaks the Word to give authority to his Son, who is referred to by John as the Word coming to live among us.



Pheoris West - *the Baptism of Christ*

It is our role in life, as people with attributes given to us by the divine, to respond to the Word whenever it is spoken to us. And it is worth remembering that we will only hear the Word fully when we become still and listen to what God wants us to hear. This is the psalmist's plea for us to: *“Be still and know that I am God”* [Psalm 46:10]. It is fundamental to our faith that we allow God to speak to our very being and urge us to become who we are really meant to be. It is unclear in the gospel whether anyone else hears the voice of God speaking to Jesus, but Jesus clearly does as he comes close to his Father. We too have true communion with him when he speaks directly to us and we discern his Will for us; we pray that we will truly value his Word ...

... *in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, AMEN*