

Baptism of Christ 2013

Isaiah 43:1-7; Luke 3:15-17,21-22

There are different approaches you can make to the Bible. There's an historical-critical approach that always wants to know the historic background to the text in order to see *why* its expressed in a particular way – for instance, comparing Luke's account of Jesus' baptism by John that I've just read out with the equivalent passages in Mark and Matthew, some may want to get behind why Luke's text says so little about the actual moment of that baptism, and seems to underplay John's part in it. But treating Holy Scripture as 'the Word of God' as Christians have always done there is, alongside that analytical tradition, a more reflective, purely intuitive approach to the Bible that doesn't worry itself about history or context, but which trusts the text on its own terms, and wants to ask what the passage is saying to **me, now**. This approach is one of the main features, for example, of 'Ignatian Spirituality', and dating even earlier from monastic discipline, is the practice known as 'lectio divina', in which short verses – or even words from a single verse – are meditated on in an attitude of prayer. At various times, perhaps on a spiritual retreat, I've been led through such a reflective study of part of the Bible, and found it deeply rewarding. There are naturally certain Bible passages that particularly lend themselves to this kind of treatment. One of those is the wonderful passage from Isaiah we heard first today. I encourage you to take your pew-sheet home, or turn this passage up in your own Bibles, and simply 'live with' its verses in the week ahead. 'Do not fear, for I have redeemed you. I have called you by name, you are mine.' See what it can mean to you to apply its encouragement personally. It's directed to 'Jacob' – to 'Israel', the Lord's 'people' of old; as Christians we are surely his people too!

Jesus knew his scriptures and was intimate with the prophecy of Isaiah; we actually hear of him reading and interpreting Isaiah at the synagogue in the next chapter of Luke. In the light of this particular Isaiah passage we can perhaps imagine something of what his baptism by John meant to him. John (as we noted during Advent) was calling people to a baptism of repentance, to prepare themselves for the 'more powerful one' who was to come, who would baptize with the Holy Spirit and with fire'. Whatever inklings of his future destiny he carried with him to this point in time Jesus may equally have had real forebodings – even feelings of complete inadequacy. And yet, there were those words of Isaiah: 'When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you; when you walk through fire you shall not be burned, and the flame shall not consume you.' When the heavens opened, 'the Holy Spirit' as we're told 'descended upon him in bodily form like a dove', and he heard the voice from heaven; would this not have fulfilled and amplified for Jesus those words of Isaiah '...you are precious in my sight, and honoured, and I love you'.

As we hear the story of his Baptism in the Gospel of Luke, the emphasis is on the time *following* his baptism, 'when he was praying'. It's *as he prays* that 'the heaven is opened'

and these other affirming manifestations are given to him. Christmas may be over, the decorations down, and weekly routines of school term and patterns of work re-established for a new year, but this continuing Season of Epiphany reminds us that our own moments of epiphany, insight and realisation can come to us at any time, as we use the resources of our faith – putting *ourselves* into the frame of inspirational Biblical writing like that in Isaiah, and reflecting on it prayerfully, and like Jesus, simply allowing **prayer** to be the air we, as Christians, breathe.