

Through the waters

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

In all my years of ministry there are lots of things I never could have predicted. Here's one. On the banks of the River Jordan, at the site of Jesus' baptism, which is also the site of Joshua crossing over into the Promised Land, and Elijah symbolically rising up into the heavens in a chariot of fire, I have become an icon! Who would have thought – an icon, a place for pilgrimage!

It is the most incredible place. From the earliest days of Christianity, churches have been built along both sides of the Jordan. One church had been able to divert some of the water under the building, into a baptismal chamber. Believers wishing to be baptised would walk down the three steps into the baptismal pool, be baptised, then walk up the three steps from the pool. Three steps, a reminder not only of the way can think of God, as Father, Son, and a Holy Spirit, or as Creator, Redeemer, Sustainer, but of the perplexing link between death and life, between crucifixion and resurrection, between the dying to sin and rising again to new life in Jesus symbolised by Good Friday, Holy Saturday, and Easter Sunday.

Three symbolic steps down, and under the water, and three symbolic steps back up.

But to get there, you had to go "through the waters".

In our reading today from the Old Testament prophet Isaiah, God is the only speaker. God tells us about Who He is and what He is about, and how He plans to act. The God Who has shaped Creation and the humanity within it. It's personal, it's intimate, it's real. The God Who tells us to "Fear not." The God Who says that He is saving us. The God Who tells us that He is calling us by name – He knows us. The God Who declares to us, each one of us, that we belong to God.

Do you need to hear that today? Any one part of that would be enough to warm your heart. But all of it together stops us in our tracks. Some verses from the Bible, whatever we may believe or not believe, have that sweeping universal appeal. They grab us. "Who among us does not know what it feels like to be overwhelmed and underprepared for life's hard places?...churches and individuals (and the whole world) want to hear, "Do not be afraid", as a sure word from God."ⁱ

You could be recently bereaved. All your adult life you've been part of a couple, then death comes, and that which gave you your identity is no longer there, and you wonder who you really are now.

You move to a new school, or go to university, or start a new job, or join a different church. You know nobody. You're on your own. You have the chance to reinvent yourself, start afresh. But who are you, and what would you really want to become?

You've just become a new parent, and you're holding in your arms, for the very first time, this tiny, bawling, let's face it not particularly attractive but definitely yours, scrap of humanity. What are you going to name it so that it becomes a new person?

You are looking at a plan for the Church in Edinburgh, and trying to follow through an agreement that we can't go on the way that we have been across Scotland, and that change and transformation, reduction and regrowth needs to take place, but the hurt and pain of letting go, of closing down and building up, of letting go so that you can get a better hold of something else is terrifying, or numbing, or bewildering.

You are in the medical profession, or the owner of a business, or the volunteer in a charity, or a teacher in the classroom, or a politician in a Parliament chamber, and the two years of pandemic have ground you down, and you feel that there is not much left when it comes to picking yourself up, dusting yourself off and starting all over again.ⁱⁱ

"Fear not, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are mine.

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.

For I am the Lord your God, the Holy One of Israel, your Saviour."

In the 6th BC the children of Israel, far from home, without a familiar place to worship, without the identity of being a nation state, without leaders in power, without holy books to remind them Who their God was, heard these words, from God, through Isaiah. And they let them wash over them. Time and again.

Through the waters of fear, inadequacy, guilt, resentment, uncertainty, shame, grief and despair, these words, again and again.

“Fear not, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are mine.

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.

For I am the Lord your God, the Holy One of Israel, your Saviour.”

Not as an anaesthetic, nor as a placebo, but as a statement of faith and trust that propelled them, and any who hear them, not backwards, but forwards. Into new places, new times, new situations.

Afraid? You bet your life! In control of what was going on? Absolutely not! Ever last detail of the journey ahead worked out? You’ve got to be kidding! But ready, prepared, willing, to take the chance, make the effort, put one faltering foot in front of the other, and step onward. “Through the waters...you are mine...” says our possessive, protective God. We can abandon fear because we have not been abandoned.

I also think these words are hard to hear. If God is with us, we may wonder, how did we end up in this mess? If God is with us, why are we so besieged by the fear of Covid and restrictions; by predicted rises in the cost of living that seem to have come from nowhere; by politicians and journalistic pundits more adept at criticism and complaint than at finding sustainable solutions and honourable practice; by churches that have in many instances buried their heads in the sand and not taken the steps to shape and reshape what they are trying to do and be in the C21st, respecting tradition but not being bound by it, living their faith in the community beyond the activities of one hour a week on Sundays. If God is with us, why do we continue to feel alienated, isolated, overwhelmed?

Plenty of questions, good questions. To which the answer remains consistently, persistently, frustratingly, “God is with us.” Followed quickly by, “and what are we, you, I, going to do about

it?" Perhaps we learn that, "We are not just human beings but human becomings...For us to be is to have a lifetime...our lifetime is a life story."ⁱⁱⁱ

According to the Gospel of Luke, all we know about the baptism of Jesus is that it was with all the people. Jesus comes for baptism with a nation and a world of sinners. He simple joined the queue with everyone who had been broken by the wear and tear of this selfish world, and had all but given upon on themselves and their God. When that line of frustrated, forgotten and frightened people formed in the hope of a new beginning, through a return to God, Jesus joined them. At His baptism, through the waters, Jesus identified with the damaged and broken and frightened and hopeful and faithful people. And after baptism, God called from heaven to tell the world of His beloved Son, in Whom He was well-pleased.

Through the waters, Jesus finds Himself beloved. Through the waters, we find ourselves beloved. Hear God call your name, go through the waters, and with God, with Jesus, come up on the other side.

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit

Amen

ⁱ Valerie Bridgeman Davis, *Feasting on the Word*, Year C, Vol 1 p219

ⁱⁱ Jerome Kerns and Dorothy Fields

ⁱⁱⁱ Herbert McCabe, *God Still Matters*, p189, in Timothy Radcliffe's *Take the Plunge*, p30