

Sun 8 January 2022. The Baptism of Jesus Matt 3.13-17 The Rev'd Chris Albany

The war in Ukraine and floods, fire and famine have dominated attention over the past year, here in Australia and internationally. The events themselves and as well the relief efforts that follow as the human family responds to the tragedy that causes devastation for so many.

At such a time our hearts cry out to God! Not with the arithmetic of blame. Not to sustain the precious structures of our theoretical constructions of divinity. Not because we think God sends such events. We don't. But because God is our way of speaking of the very depth of being and God is compassionately engaged and knows us. Of course, this is like poetry and far from adequate or accurate. But we want to cry out to God and cry out with God. We want to believe that God is not disinterested. It is a conversation of the soul, our deep inner being. O God, hear our grief! O God, help these people!

The central message of Christmas, and of Jesus' life and teaching and example is precisely that God is not disinterested. The God whom Jesus reveals is the one who enters into the fullness of human experience, symbolised in that passage we have just heard by Jesus submitting himself to baptism by John despite the latter's protestations. Thus earning God's acclamation. Bill Loader the UCA theologian says "Jesus righteousness is not primarily about being right but about doing what God wants and that is never unconnected from God's saving, compassionate purpose"

At times such as the disastrous events of the past year what moves within us and surges for fulfilment is compassion, the very being of God - an image of our co-humanity. Deep love for other people and for our world flows from within and joins us to each other and to God. It has been said God is an ocean of goodness, reaching our shore, yet far beyond our horizon and deeper than our profoundest thought. That surge moves us and we have learned to understand sin as resistance to its life. We see the tide of generosity about us and recognise the life of God.

Recognising our common frailty we respond with human care. Such solidarity will even set aside the preoccupations of war. When people are reduced to surviving, our common humanity asserts itself. We connect with and support each other. We've seen it at the grassroots level after fires and floods, in the people of Ukraine. At least these are things we can do something about. Flooding rains are beyond our control. Earthquakes can happen anywhere and are due in some of the world's most populated and developed areas. Hopefully asteroids will continue to miss.

Moments of vulnerability give us the opportunity to reconnect to what really matters. Ultimately that is about connecting to God. To do so is to sense a surging passion for good and for change, a refusal to ignore the shores beyond our own, a willingness to be engaged for all humanity. Some of our crises are as big as that and bigger: they affect the entire planet. The future effects of global warming remain a remote concern for too many - though they are now beyond dispute. The huge problems of poverty surface in our consciousness mostly only at the level of ever less shocking scenes - as we become accustomed to them. Getting to the real underlying issues to prevent the causes is too remote to be relevant for most people.

Today and every Sunday we come to connect with God - that is what baptism is about it is a sacrament of connection and belonging. Baptism not only tells us who we are but whose we are. Remember the words we have just heard, "this is my Son, the beloved. In whom I am well pleased". At a baptism, the priest makes the sign of the cross on the person forehead with the words "I sign you with the sign of the cross to mark you as Christ's own forever".

A South American Indian liturgy puts it more powerfully – with the priest saying “I brand you (like cattle) with the sign of the cross, so that the world will always know and you will never be able to deny to whom you belong.”

As parents, grandparents, family friends we do so for our children because we want the best for them and we sense that the best always has to do with God. We bring them to God, in the midst of the community of God's people that God might guide, bless, encourage and sustain them through life. That they might become the compassionate, just, creative fully alive persons God gifts each of us to be. We do so too because Jesus is the one who helps us know and become our true self – to live authentically. So pray that God will guide and direct us and our children and grandchildren through life so that we live in ways to help the world to be a world which sees an increase in compassion and reaching across the pseudo boundaries of race, ethnicity, creed, nationality. Not just when there are natural disasters and wars and the world responds in quite unprecedented ways with its massive relief effort. May there not be a falling back all too quickly into the conflicts and fears and suspicions that keep us divided and at enmity one with another.

O God, help us care about the world in which we live! Help us make it a more just, compassionate and peaceful world for us and all our children to grow up in. Amen