Baptism of Christ Sermon

The medium of the sermon comes in different forms. Some sermons are an exposition of a text or a series of readings. Others are based on a story from scripture or from history. Some are dispassionate, while others ‘tug at the heart strings’. One bishop I worked for said the preacher should try to make his hearers both laugh and cry! Some sermons are for teaching purposes, even verging on the didactic. That same bishop said “tell the congregation what you are going to tell them; tell them; and then remind them what you have told them”. Still other sermons can be described as ‘a stream of consciousness’; where one thought leads on to another.

I fear that this sermon, on the Sunday when the church thinks of the Baptism of Christ, comes into that last category. The starting point for this consciousness stream are words from Liba in the “Thought for the Month” in this month’s e-magazine. Considering she had to write them before Christmas to be ahead of the publishing deadline they must be thought of as prophetic. In wishing us a ‘Happy New Year’ she encourages us to look for “kingfisher moments”. It is a phrase learnt from a friend to describe those brief glimpses into eternity that we obtain from a baby’s smile, an unexpected sight in nature, or something we achieve for the first time.

It made me think of the times I have been privileged to see that flash of translucent turquoise of a kingfisher flitting along a small steam or alighting on the bird’s favourite ‘fishing branch’. My mind wandered to think what a kingfisher would have thought if it had flitted along the river Jordan at the time of the scene described by Mark in the gospel we have read today. Would it have been frightened by the crowds there? Would it have felt affronted because John and Jesus were disturbing the fish in the water? Would it have realised that history was in the making?

If a kingfisher had been there when Jesus met with John to be baptised by him in the river Jordan it would have witnessed what, to change the metaphor, was a ‘light bulb’ moment for all. Not just for humanity but for the whole of creation. The beginning of the earthly ministry of God’s Son. The point of public recognition that Jesus was the one to go beyond John’s call for repentance. The one of whom John said:

“The one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; … I have baptized you with water; but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.”

As Jesus came up out of the waters, the Holy Spirit came on him like a dove descending and he heard the voice of affirmation:

          “You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.”

In our reading from the Acts of the Apostles, Luke records another ‘light bulb’ moment. The point where Paul asks disciples in Ephesus whether they have the Holy Spirit – only to get the answer, “who’s that!” They had only been baptised with John’s baptism of repentance. When Paul explained that Jesus had come after John and baptized with the Holy Spirit they said, in a manner of speaking, “we want some of that!” They were baptized and the Holy Spirit came on them and they began to show the fruits of the Spirit.

At this point in my reflection on ‘kingfisher’ or ‘light bulb’ moments I recollected a story from years ago. Back then I had a friend who was a lecturer in sociology. One evening he had taken his students to a large youth club so that they could gain an insight into the lives of the youngsters who attended it. Having set them their task, he got into conversation with an older teenager. The conversation went something like this:

Tutor:          “Hello, do you work here” (he thought she was old enough to be a member of staff or a volunteer.)

Girl:             “No, I work in a local factory”

Tutor:          “Oh! What do you make?”

Girl:             “I don’t know!”

Tutor:          “Well, what do you do?”

Girl:             “I sit at a machine. Bits of rubber come along from the next machine. I press a button with my left hand and a stamp comes down and cuts a large U-shape out of the block of rubber. I then pull a lever with my right hand and a different stamp cuts V-shaped bits out of the top of it.”

Tutor:          “Yes, but what is it, what does it look like?”

Girl:             (after a moment of thought), “It looks like the heel of a Wellington Boot. Eeeee! I make wellington boots!”

That was that young woman’s light bulb moment. It was brought about by the patient questioning of my friend. It corrected a failure in her training. She had been taught what to do. No one had thought to tell her why she was doing it – what part she had in the process of making a boot. Therefore she lacked fulfilment because she did not realise her part in the finished product.

So, what is the finished product of all this rambling of mine around the baptism of Jesus? Certainly not that we should baptize everything that moves along the conveyor belt of life and history. Like our response to each part of the Christian story, the story of Christ Jesus, the end product we should aim for is being closer to God. Closer to God in our personal practice and in our discipleship.

Closer to God by experiencing the ‘kingfisher’ moments. I’m having one right now. As I’m writing these words I am looking out at the clear blue sky of post sunrise morning. It brings me joy. It brings me light. It makes me think of the light of Christ shining in my life. It emboldens me to think of the possibility of that light shining into the lives of others. It gives me hope.

Closer to God by seeking out ‘light bulb’ moments when our faith gets strengthened. ‘Light bulb’ moments when through our gentle questioning or encouraging we can see the light of faith go on in the eyes of others. Times when we see others take the next step into ministry and discipleship. One of our most moving Christmas cards was from a priest who told us, for health reasons, he was having to retire from volunteer ministry at 88. In the card he reflected “it was all down to you”. My mind went back to when I had suggested ordination to him. How do you say that to the then Chief Executive of Avon County Council – and the chairman of the church Council which managed your work! It was a risk – but one I will always be thankful I took.

Even in these dark days, when we cannot meet with others, we can still be in contact with them. We can telephone them. We can write to them. And for those of you who are more tech-savvy than me, we can contact them through social media. The most important thing is that we have conversations with them. That we encourage them to look for ‘kingfisher’ moments in their lives and that we rejoice with them when the light of Christ strikes them more forcefully than in the past.

May we continue to come together in the faith of Christ as we are kept apart by Covid.              Amen