

Graham Greene, famed American author once wrote that, “A story has no beginning or end: arbitrarily one chooses that moment of experience from which to look back or from which to look ahead.” For months now we have been talking and learning about **The Story**, the Story that as Christians gives shape to our lives and in fact gives shape to whole of the universe: The Story of God. We began with what it means to Know the Story and through Advent we began to explore what it means to live out that story in our daily lives. At Christmas we heard and celebrated the strange but life-giving twist that has God, the very author of the story, enter in the fabric of that Story.

I think that Graham Greene's words about stories are particularly true of God's Story; there is no beginning to God's story and there is no end. But there are points where we choose “the moment of experience”, as Greene puts it to look back or to look ahead. Although this is the Story which has no beginning or end and which undergirds all of creation and existence, which gives us our life and breath, there are moments when each of us are invited into the Story, invited to share in God's divine narrative, in his poetry and prose. For each of us they vary: some of us are invited into the Story through spectacular life-changing events in our lives others are invited into the Story gradually, as the grace and mercy of God wash over us like water flowing over stone creating grooves where once there were none. While each of us may have different moments of experience from where to look back or forwards, each Christian marks these moments in the same way: Baptism. In Baptism we celebrate God's Story, we celebrate what Jesus has done and we celebrate the parts we are invited to play in the narrative of salvation.

Today in the church year, we celebrate the Feast of the Baptism of our Lord, we remember Jesus' baptism in the Jordan river at the hands of John the Baptist. And so I think it is an ideal time for us to remember our own Baptisms - our own invitation and entrance into the Story of God - and to remember what we as a church do in Baptism (and what we don't do) and why it is vitally important. For many of us, if not most of us, remembering our Baptism is difficult if nigh impossible - since after all most of us were likely baptized as infants - merely weeks or months old - which is the prevailing custom in the Anglican Church. However, every time we celebrate a baptism in our services we are gifted with the chance to remember our own baptism and in fact renew our baptismal covenant. And so today as we seek to Live out the Story of God, let us return to each of our beginnings in this story, let us remember our baptisms.

As we examine our passages from Isaiah and Luke this morning, we will but scratch the surface of the theology and practice of Baptism and how it shapes our lives as followers of Jesus, as a vast amount of time and effort over the past two millenia have been spent by Christian thinkers on the topic of Baptism. But it is important nonetheless, because all too often we have undervalued or lost touch with why the Church is a baptizing community, because when we don't remember our baptisms and the great privilege it is to participate in them then Baptism loses its strength as a sacrament - as a moment where we experience the invisible grace of God - and rather becomes just a rite of passage in the life of a child, just a cultural norm that has become disconnected from the faith of Christ Crucified, and just an opportunity to celebrate the birth of a child, rather than something far greater and more wondrous than we can ask or imagine.

The prophet Isaiah writes “But now thus says the Lord, he who created you, O Jacob, he who formed you, O Israel: Do not fear, 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.” The prophet’s words were delivered to a nation in Exile, a people who had been defeated and removed from the land God had promised them; they were words that recalled the great Exodus of Israel from Egypt, God’s greatest act of salvation in the History of Israel, and act which formed the people of God. The prophet’s words spoke of God’s promise to his people, spoke of the God’s faithfulness and his promise to be with them and redeem his people. For Israel these were promises for the future, promises yet to be fulfilled, but today we, from our own “moment of experience” as Graham Greene put it, we know that in Jesus, in his life, death and resurrection they have been fulfilled and that in baptism we become heirs to these promises. In baptism, we recall that we have been redeemed by God, that he has paid a ransom for our deliverance from sin and despair. In baptism the words of the prophet Isaiah ring true “I have called you by name, you are mine.” There is a point during the liturgy of baptism, right after water has been poured over the person, that the priest says - “I sign you with the Cross, and mark you as Christ’s own forever” - it is said so quickly that we may overlook the significance of these words - but it is by far my favourite part, a beautiful moment where we recognize that in baptism God has declared that we are his, he has called us by name and that he will be with us through all things. In baptism God declares that we are worth something, that even if no one else in the world sees our value, God does.

These words are powerful because we too are a people in Exile, we too are a people like Israel before us who wander away from God and his promises - and yet into the darkness of our exile God’s words pierce the darkness - like the heavens opening, like a dove descending, like a voice breaking through from the heavens. God’s Story is one of redemption: God pursues us even when we run away from him; God redeems us even when we believe we can save ourselves; in the face of all the facts that say otherwise God declares that we are precious, that we are honoured and loved. In baptism we learn firsthand that the love of God is unconditional, that it does not matter who you are, it does not matter what you may have done or what you may haven’t done - all that matters is that God has redeemed you, that God loves you and that he offers new life to you through the death and resurrection of his Son Jesus.

In our reading from Luke we hear the story of Jesus’ Baptism, we hear the story of Jesus, the Son of God, descending into the water of the Jordan River, descending into the baptism of John, and as he comes out of the water we hear that the heavens were torn apart and that the Spirit of God descends like a dove upon him. As the spirit alights upon Jesus the voice of the Father resonates in the air “You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.” At the heart of baptism is this declaration, this pronouncement of God: You are my child, the beloved; with you I am well pleased. At the heart of our sacrament of baptism, at the heart of our entrance into the Church and into the Grand Story of God is this declaration of God’s love for us. We are all God’s children; we are all God’s beloved.

As we celebrate the Feast of the Baptism of our Lord, let us remember our own baptisms, let us remember that they are far more than a blessing, far more than a rite of passage or time to celebrate - they are doorways into a different world, they are portals that allow us a taste of God’s Story of redemption and reconciliation, they are a chance to enter the story, and set our sights on the beginning and the end, the Alpha and the Omega, Jesus Christ our Saviour and Lord. Amen.