

Baptism of Christ 2025 GSM

Isaiah 43.1-7; Psalm 29; Acts 8.14-17; Luke 3.15-17, 21, 22

This morning's Old Testament reading contains some of the most precious and beautiful words of scripture, in my opinion. Just have another listen: *'Thus says the Lord, who created you ... who formed you : Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are mine ... you are precious in my sight, and honoured, and I love you...'*

The level of intimacy in these words is what we might expect to find between lovers or perhaps between parents and children: 'you are precious in my sight, and honoured, and I love you' ... 'you are mine'.

Although this word of the Lord was delivered through Isaiah five or six hundred years before the coming of Christ, there is a clear echo in today's Gospel story, when Jesus rises from the waters of baptism and hears the heavenly voice: 'You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.' In that moment, the Holy Spirit descends on him and we can make another link – this time to our reading from the Acts of the Apostles, in which we heard how the Spirit is given to the early Christian community. And the church enacts all of these connections in its rites of initiation, as we receive the gift of the Spirit through baptism and the laying on of hands at confirmation, when the bishop speaks these words: *Tom, Dick, Harriet ... God has called you by name and made you his own. Confirm, O Lord, your servant with your Holy Spirit.*

The message is clear in scripture and the tradition of worship: by the Holy Spirit, Christians are brought into Christ's intimate relationship with God: *You are my beloved child; with you I am well pleased. I have called you by name, you are mine ... you are precious in my sight, and honoured, and I love you.*

This is an extraordinary claim, and it stands as an objective statement of the Christian faith. But we are not only instructed to *believe* it. We are invited to *live into* it. How can we do that?

I return to these texts often in my prayers, especially the words of Isaiah. They ground my faith and my relationship with God. It might be something you could take into your devotional practice too. Perhaps once a week, maybe first thing on a Monday morning as you nurse a cup of coffee or wait in a traffic jam or sit on a train; or maybe every lunchtime or in the first few moments after the light goes out at the end of the day; you could let those words of the Lord fill your mind and heart: *I have called you by name, you are mine ... you are precious in my sight, and honoured, and I love you.* Just let them go round and round inside you, and see how they touch you.

At the risk of sounding soppy – not something usually associated with archdeacons! - I think we're supposed to receive them and cherish them as a love letter from the Lord. We can carry them around in the hidden pocket of our heart (so to speak); and we can access them at any time: sometimes we might just take a quick glance, when we need reassurance in a moment of despondency or woe, when just a word or two might do: *you are mine! ... you are precious! ... I love you!* Sometimes we will have more leisure and we can savour the whole truth slowly: *I have called you by name, you are mine ... you are precious in my sight, and honoured, and I love you.* There are countless other Bible verses you could turn to, of course, but you have to start somewhere and I can't think of anything better to lay the foundation of intimacy with God.

The first verse of this morning's Gospel began 'the people were filled with expectation'. I wonder: are we? Are we filled with expectation that God might have something more in store for us than we already know or experience? Do we expect to enjoy a deeper level of intimacy with God? This is the promise and work of prayer, summed up in John Henry Newman's motto: *Cor ad cor loquitur*. Heart speaks to heart. This is the essence of prayer.

I know we're now a couple of weeks into 2025 and you may have already made, and quite possibly broken, your New Year's resolutions. But it's not too late to add one more. You could even get creative about it. Imagine, for example, you could dwell on the Lord's word for the time it takes to sip your way through a gin

and tonic? Or if you have serious willpower, you could put a piece of chocolate on your tongue and pray the words of the Lord until it has completely melted, letting the real and metaphorical sweetness fill your insides.

Maybe you think I've finally lost the plot! But notice that again and again, this morning's Psalm 29 referred us to 'the voice of the Lord' and its powerful effects. 'May the Lord give strength to his people,' it ended, 'May the Lord bless his people!' I reckon there is an abundance of strength and blessing that could flow through this congregation from this morning's word of God:

'Thus says the Lord, who created you ... who formed you : Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are mine ... you are precious in my sight, and honoured, and I love you.'