

## The Baptism of Christ

12 January 2014

Isaiah 42:1-9

Psalm 29

Acts 10:34-43

Matthew 3:13-17

The liturgical year since the Nativity has taken us from newborn to child (return from Egypt), to newborn again (Magi – scholars differ about whether this took place, if at all, before or after Egypt), to adult (today), then child (Jesus staying behind in Jerusalem) and baby again (*Presentation*, at the beginning of February).

What's occurin'?

As a child I was always enraged when adults referred to me as Arthur's lad, or whatever, and it narks me now to hear people say so-and-so's daughter or son. They have a name, dammit, and they were given it at Baptism.

When we give someone a name, we feel more personally involved with him or her. A different kind of relationship is established: *I'm now me, not just Arthur's son, or his car, or his boots*. Using a name, we can address someone directly.

But other things happen too when we give somebody a name. We make them part of *our* tribe, *our* group. We domesticate them like a pet. We begin to feel comfortable with them and as if we should be able to *control* them, drink tea with them and suck them into our prejudices.

It's easy to let this happen with our relationship with the Master.

We begin to feel we know him. We ask him for this or that favour, ignoring the fact that millions of others ask for favours that cancel our's out. We ask him to cure this or that illness in someone we know, as if he is at our beck and call. We twist his teaching to suit us and our situation, ignoring the fact that we are already pampered and privileged. As we domesticate Jesus we try to make him 'one of us', like a lap dog that wags its tail and goes for walkies at our whim.

It is dangerous to claim to know Jesus. It reflects our narcissism. What emerges from Holy Scripture is just how unpredictable he is. I marvel at those people who claim to know the Master. I do not dare presume. He is concentrated, undiluted love—certainly—but that is not limited by *my* desires and prejudices. Concentrated, undiluted love might mean saying 'no' to me, for my own well-being. Many churches have the strap-line 'to know Jesus and to make him known'. Good luck with that.

*Who is doing the naming in today's Gospel?* The mistake I'm making is to assume that I'm doing the naming. Of course I'm not. 'This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased' doesn't come from my mouth, nor from the mouth of John the Baptist, who's puzzled by Jesus' appearance in the queue. 'What are you doing here? You know what I'm on about better than I do.'

Jesus doesn't need baptism. But maybe he's waiting in line for our benefit. Acting as our representative, he shows us what to do. In the words we heard at the carol service: 'and if you want to know the way, be pleased to hear what he did say'. He identifies with all of us imperfect people who need a fresh start and a new identity—which is one of the things that baptism's about.

The Gospel tells us whose son Jesus is, and the first readers knew very well what his name meant. Jesus, the Greek version of Joshua (and like Jason, as in the Argonauts), means 'the one who saves'. From what, by what means, and to what end, are topics for a whole course of sermons.

Whatever else today's events mean for you and me, they remind us that the Master is not a personal pet, to be called on only when we need a bit of a cuddle and ignored the rest of the time. And just as he, the beloved Son, shows us the way, all of us are beloved sons and daughters of the Divine Lord, with all the rights and responsibilities that brings.

Jesus is immersed in the Jordan. We are immersed in divine love, by no means always easy to bear. Today is a call to think about our personal relationship to the God we claim to worship.