

The Baptism of Jesus

8 January 2023

Hearing the voice of God telling us we are the Beloved.

Reading: Matthew 3:13-17

The phone call came through on Christmas Eve. Could Father Nikolai bring me communion? At first, I wondered who Father Nickolai was. It turned out the man asking for home communion was Russian orthodox. The nearest Russian Orthodox priest was in Auckland, so I would have to do. Knowing he was Russian Orthodox I thought as I rushed out the door, to take an icon we have of Mary and Jesus. Anyway, it was just the right thing to do. When he saw it, he burst into tears, and began to tell me his story. He had been held for years in a Serbian concentration camp for his faith. He showed me the serial number they had tattooed on his arm. I just listened and he talked in broken English, crying most of the time. He thanked me, no one he said, has ever listened to my story. More about listening in a moment.

Today we celebrate one of the most important festivals of the church. Mostly forgotten as important, the baptism of Jesus marks a turning point in Jesus' life and ministry.

When the adult Jesus steps onto the pages of the Gospel he doesn't come with a great fanfare, rather he humbly asks for baptism from John. He is aligning himself with the hope that John the baptizer is offering.

The Spirit descends like a dove as Jesus rises from the water and this hints at the Creation story in Genesis 1:2 where the spirit of God hovered over the face of the waters bringing life out of the depths. Now the spirit hovers again, breathing fresh life into the world through Jesus Christ. A work of creation is happening again. Through Jesus' coming ministry the world will be renewed from within.

The key to unlock this passage is verse 17: "You are my beloved, in whom I am well pleased."

It's an old word, beloved. We don't often say beloved to one another. But it's a very beautiful word, beloved. Especially when you break it down. It literally means "be" "loved." God is saying to Jesus, "Be loved". "Be loved by me. You are the apple of my eye. You are the one I delight in. You give me joy and pleasure and delight."

Something remarkable happened for Jesus that day. Jesus found a deeper assurance of his Father's presence through his baptism, and this gave him calm, confidence, a calling and meaning for his life. Or, to put it another way, the hole in the donut was filled with God's love.

As we stand at the beginning of a new year, whose voice are we going to listen to?

Are we going to listen to the voice of God that names us as his beloved?

When we hear we are truly loved, that transforms our lives.

Like most young men Sam was very nervous about his bar mitzvah. All his family and friends would be there and, to make matters worse, he had a lot of lines he had to recite by heart. At a bar mitzvah it is traditional for the parents to say something too, much as we might at a 21st. As his father got up to speak, Sam's heart was pounding high up in his chest.

His father cleared his throat. "Sam, Mum, and I want you to know that whether you will have success or not, whether you become important or not, whether you are healthy or not, whether you have children or not, we love you. Always remember how much your mother and I love you." Something came over Sam at that point. Up till then he had always believed that he had to earn his parents' love by doing well at school or being good at sports or going to the right university. It was at that moment he felt truly at peace like he never had before, Sam said later. And it was because he now knew his parents' love was not conditional on him being successful or important or healthy. He was loved without condition.

Another young person had a similar experience at a youth camp – like the Easter camp here in Christchurch. There were thousands of kids there and the organizers with the best of intentions had arranged cross-country. Some kids are better at cross country than others. But the man on the loudspeaker called out the name of each teenager as they crossed the line and their place. When the last kid was coming up to the line her friends could see what was about to happen. Rather than let her be named forever as the kid that got last, her friends ran down to the final 100 meters and held hands with her and they all crossed the line together. There was no last that day, just 20 friends finishing together. Susan the runner said "I felt a connection with other Christians that I had never felt before in my life. It was unconditional love."

Unfortunately, most of us struggle for one reason or another to hear that we are loved.

But what that voice said of Jesus on the day of his baptism, God is saying to you today: "You (insert your name here) are my beloved. Be loved. In you I delight. You are the apple of my eye. I delight in you. I cherish you. You give me great joy."

We don't have to do anything to earn God's love – it is already given. This is the great message of the Bible – God's unearned but abundant love for each of us. We have a special name for this love. We call it grace.

The point is that God doesn't make junk. God carefully and painstakingly watched over your making. Even in your mother's womb God was carefully crafting you from the very best for the very best.

Through our baptism God has named us as his beloved too. God enjoys us and delights in who we are.

My invitation to you this week is to simply take some time, just you and God. Sit quietly in God's presence and listen to God's message to you, you are my beloved.

And this, my friends, is the most important thing you will do all year.