

Sermon for Sunday 12 January 2025

The Baptism of Christ

Isaiah 43: 1 – 7; Acts 8: 14 – 17; Luke 3: 15 – 17, 21 – 22

Hearing the Voice of God

- ¹ Ascribe to the Lord, O heavenly beings,
ascribe to the Lord glory and strength.
- ² Ascribe to the Lord the glory of his name;
worship the Lord in holy splendour.
- ³ The voice of the Lord is over the waters;
the God of glory thunders,
the Lord, over mighty waters.
- ⁴ The voice of the Lord is powerful;
the voice of the Lord is full of majesty.
- ⁵ The voice of the Lord breaks the cedars;
the Lord breaks the cedars of Lebanon.
- ⁶ He makes Lebanon skip like a calf,
and Sirion like a young wild ox.
- ⁷ The voice of the Lord flashes forth flames of
fire.
- ⁸ The voice of the Lord shakes the wilderness;
the Lord shakes the wilderness of Kadesh.

⁹ The voice of the Lord causes the oaks to whirl,
and strips the forest bare;
and in his temple all say, ‘Glory!’
(Psalm 29: 1 – 9)

We’re thinking today about the voice of God, and how we hear it. Those words I just read come from Psalm 29, the Psalm appointed to go with today’s readings. They remind me of a family holiday some 20 years ago. We went via Germany – mostly by train - to the Czech Republic and Slovakia, ending up in Poland. We stayed for a few days in the High Tatras, a mountain range between Slovakia and Poland. I think it was the first night we were there, that there was a thunderstorm overnight. A day or two later I saw large trees which had been upright that had been felled by the storm.

⁹ The voice of the Lord causes the oaks to whirl,
and strips the forest bare;
and in his temple all say, ‘Glory!’

The power of God displayed in nature – the voice of God – causes His worshippers to cry ‘Glory!’ I’m sure we’ve all experienced sights and sounds in nature which make us want to cry ‘Glory!’ too.

The voice of God is heard in a very different way in our Gospel reading today. Jesus has just stepped forward from amongst a group of people and has been baptised. At this point, he's one of a crowd. But after the baptism, he prays, and it is while he is praying that the Holy Spirit descends on him like a dove, and a voice from heaven is heard. "You are my Son, the beloved, with you I am well pleased." (Luke 3:22)

These are highly important words. A revelation to all who heard them, and to us as we read them, of Jesus' identity as the Son of God. Also, a confirmation to Jesus Himself of His status and of God's approval. What an encouragement to him as he sets out on his public ministry, especially as the very next thing that happens is the temptation in the wilderness.

All of this prompts me to ask. How do we hear the voice of God? Or perhaps – why do we not hear it so much?

To think about this I'd like to go back to one of the stories about Elijah from the book of Kings. It's from 1 Kings 19. Elijah has just had a great victory over the prophets of Baal, proving their

God to be powerless against the God of Israel. But in doing this he's also enraged Jezebel, the wife of King Ahab, who, as a foreigner, is a worshipper of Baal. He knows his life is in danger, and he runs away into the wilderness, until he can run no more. He sits down, exhausted, and asks God to let him die. He falls asleep. But God twice sends an angel with food and water, which gives Elijah the strength to continue to the holy mountain at Horeb. Once there, Elijah pours out the story to God of what he has done, and how his life is now in danger. God sends a great storm, but this time his voice is not in the wind or the earthquake or the fire, but in the silence that follows this. Elijah repeats his complaint to God. This time, finally, he's in the right state of mind to listen. He's able to hear and take in what God wants him to do next.

After his great work, Elijah was so scared and so exhausted, that he was unable to listen to God. But God never gave up on him or abandoned him. He cared for him, watched over him, and waited until he had recovered enough to be able to truly listen and hear God's voice. Once that happened, Elijah received his instructions and was able to do

what God asked of him next as the prophet to the people of Israel.

I wonder if that resonates with you? It certainly does with me – feeling too busy, too tired, too distracted, too full of cold – to pray or really listen to God. We're not all in situations as dramatic as Elijah's – but so many things can get in the way of us hearing God's voice.

Back to Jesus at his baptism. Jesus has just been baptised – not, like everyone else in the crowd, for the forgiveness of sin, but, as Matthew explains “to fulfil all righteousness” (Matthew 3:15). In other words, he believes it is the right thing to do in obedience to his heavenly Father. When the voice from God comes, he is praying. Jesus is in exactly the right state of mind - a place of obedience and prayer. He's ready to hear God's voice. So he receives those wonderful words of love and affirmation.

The mission for which Jesus is now empowered by the Holy Spirit is to draw all of us human beings into that same Father/child relationship with God which he enjoys as the 'beloved son'.

Because of Jesus, we are all beloved sons and daughters of God.

Every time we pray the Lord's Prayer, which Jesus himself taught us, there is the invitation to re-orientate ourselves to our Heavenly Father. Every time, we say “thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven”. Those are not easy words to pray, especially in times of hardship, grief and difficulty. But the more we can do this, the more we shall be able to hear the voice of God speaking into our lives, affirming that we are his beloved children and speaking about all that he wishes to lead us into in the coming year.

Amen

Revd Diana Young