

The Baptism of Jesus

9 January 2022

Forgive me, but I am not going to talk about the baptism of Christ this morning. As I hinted at the beginning of the service, I have found the last three months restorative in all sorts of ways; I have had time to pray, write and think, and it has been affirming for me to reflect on what is, and more significantly, what isn't important to me as a Christian priest serving this community. I won't bore you with obvious spleen-venting about the nonsense we all have to put up with, but I did think that, for this morning, I would share something of that reflection, something that has been reaffirmed in my absence from this place.

We often say that the Church is not about buildings; it is about people. And that is certainly true; we should not be obsessed with bricks and mortar but with the people who make the building come alive. But 'the Church is the people' is one of those ever so slightly vacuous phrases that, when you examine it, doesn't mean a great deal; it's a bit like saying England has a cricket team – a fact in itself, but one that doesn't get you very far, and one that comes under certain duress when you consider what's been happening Down Under over the last few weeks. My suspicion with the phrase 'the Church is the people' is that it can be used in a broad or a narrower sense; broad in the sense that everyone is welcome to come to the holy place; narrower in the sense of referring to the regular congregation that attends that holy place week by week, the 'Church as people' being defined primarily as the main congregation, and not everyone else who attends for whatever reason. Such a distinction could lead, in certain cases, to that congregation seeing themselves as having some greater ownership of what goes on in that particular church. Such distinctions are evident in the letters of St John in the New Testament, where a closed Christian community almost see themselves as a fortress church, a hallowed band of brothers and sisters bonding together to keep out the great unwashed. There is also a tendency, therefore, to gather with people who think and believe roughly the same as we do, which in turn may subconsciously deter others who *don't* think the same from joining in.

I know things are not as simplistic as that, and that I have described something in binary terms that is much more porous than that, but that potential, to literally congregate with those who reflect our own views is an innate human temptation. We actually find reassurance in being with people who think like us, pray like us, worship like us. There is nothing instinctively wrong about this, but it does run the risk of becoming ever so slightly exclusive: *we* may think we are open to all, but our behaviour, doing things in a certain way, could well signal a certain type of belonging, those who act like us, and those who don't.

So, I have tended to see 'the Church is people' as being slightly problematic. The alternative I have long settled on for some time is the phrase (if settle on a phrase we must) 'the Church is place,' where it, and everyone in that place, is set. This, for me, roots the Church's witness in the place it happens to be located, hallowing the space within and around it, being a place that is immediately recognisable for what it is, and is

there for everyone in its vicinity, and not just a place where the faithful congregate. It means loving not just the people and things we do know, but caring for those, in that place, we don't.

I have long thought and felt this about the cathedral, that it is a place that is for everyone, but in my time away, away from the plate-spinning that occupies a lot of our time in actually running a cathedral, I have had this sense of holiness clarified and burnished. Why do I think so? Well, such a view is deeply incarnational for a start: Jesus was born in a time *and* place; his was no ethereal ministry, an incorporeal angelic figure floating between the stars. He was born amidst the dirt and degradation, far away from the celestial palaces of kings and princes. His was a grounded ministry, in a real place, not one that was embedded in a sanctuary, protected from the outside world by a kind of religious myopia. True, he had a peripatetic ministry, and gathered around him disciples, but they were a hotch-potch of different people who wouldn't automatically have been members of the same club. Jesus was there for all, not just for the favoured few.

This is what I believe the Church needs to reflect. This is what this cathedral church needs to reflect. And this, I firmly believe, is what this cathedral sets out to do: it is hugely conscious of its mission and its purpose as a *place* of Christian witness. Believe me, this is not the same as saying it is a beautiful and important building, true though that is. We are not here as custodians of a particular heritage. But I would be wrong and foolish if I denied that the beauty and sense of awe that this building evokes did not have an impact upon people's spiritual sensibilities; of course it does. But the bottom line is that we are a living witness to the incarnate God, Jesus Christ, and we do this by being firmly placed in our context of ministry and witness, not facing inwards to satisfy ourselves and shoring up our own sense of holiness, but by always facing outwards to everyone for whom this place has a meaning or even a presence.

You don't need me to tell you how that manifests itself: over the last month thousands of people, whilst coping with the restraints of Plan B, have been drawn to this place and have sensed its shimmering holiness. Two brief examples of this: I have already referred to the Christmas tree stars but in addition I could cite the Pets Service, which does more than any other service I can think of to demonstrate God's unconditional love for all his creation. And Jethro's funeral last Monday could not have happened anywhere else. Jethro may not have been a lay assistant of this cathedral church and Jim Davidson may have had a free gig, but he was also aware of the place he was in, that something of deep-seated and heaven-directed value was palpable. This place is a magnet of holiness; it has the presence to draw people through its hallowed portals, and to draw out of them their neediest thoughts and prayers. This isn't in the Alpha course, but it is the corollary of what happened in that stable over 2,000 years ago. This is our calling. This is what we do.

But there is challenge in this as well as celebration. I said earlier that 'Church is people' could lead to a like-minded gathering of people with all the dangers that this implies. 'Church is place' offers a challenge to each and everyone of us in that, if we are drawn

by the place of the cathedral in our hearts and in the life of Cornwall, not just Truro, then we have to accept that each and everyone of us has a value in being here. This cathedral church is not just for the like-minded. I am drawn here (partly because it's my job!), and so is each one of you. But so is the stranger at the gate; so is the person suffering from mental problems who just needs a place to rest for a while, and they all have a claim on calling this place their own. Let me tell you: there is no hierarchy of ownership here. Shepherds and wise men, in equal degree, are welcome.

And there's more: again, you don't need me to tell you that not everyone associated with a church or a cathedral doesn't always get on with each other all the time. It may come as a shock, but that is the way of things. As that old religious phrase says: where two or three are gathered together in my name, each one will think that the other two are ganging up on them!

A theology of place requires us, each and every one of us, to learn to love one another, in spite of the personal differences that exist between us; no, *because* of the personal differences that exist between us. It is easy to hang out with people you like; it is easy to gravitate towards those who don't challenge us. But God creates us all differently, and those differences sometimes express themselves as a challenge. And when we face those challenges we shouldn't run off to another building with a few like-minded others and start all over again (such was and is the fatal flaw of Protestantism), but try and face them as presentations of grace (and catholicism actually means universal, incorporating all and everyone, which is why, in our creeds, we say we believe in one *catholic* and apostolic church). Of course, this doesn't mean that we should actively seek difficulty in a hair-shirt sort of way, but if we have a deep desire to be brothers and sisters of Jesus, to care for those who are, in our firmament, the least, the lost, the last and the unloved, then we must expect our own presuppositions and our own behaviour sometimes to come under holy scrutiny. It means trying to love the people you don't like, as well as those you do. (One of my tutors at theological college, a monk of Mirfield, said that, during the Peace, we should seek out the person we like the least or to whom we need to be reconciled, although such a move would obviously get the gossip-mongers going!)

A theology of place places the love of God and neighbour at the heart of what we do. Worshipping in a cathedral is a beautiful and uplifting experience, and we are attracted here for all sorts of reasons. But if we are true to our Christian calling such an attraction comes with an obligation to turn this loving aspiration into a reality. And that reality is to ponder the place where God chose to be born, not in the beautiful and seraphic, but in a place of marginal importance to the more self-contained sections of humanity. It is not just in hearing sweet harmony that we are transported nearer to heaven, but as much in the kindness we show to each other, the stranger and, yes, the person we find difficult to like. In doing that we gaze more intently than in anything else we do on the face of the stabled child.