

Baptism of Christ Waddington

"A cold coming we had of it,
Just the worst time of the year
For a journey, and such a long journey:
The was deep and the weather sharp,
The very dead of winter."
And the camels galled, sore-footed, refractory,
Lying down in the melting snow.
There were times we regretted
The summer palaces on slopes, the terraces,
And the silken girls bringing sherbet.
Then the camel men cursing and grumbling
And running away, and wanting their liquor and women,
And the night-fires gong out, and the lack of shelters,
And the cities hostile and the towns unfriendly
And the villages dirty, and charging high prices.:
A hard time we had of it.
At the end we preferred to travel all night,
Sleeping in snatches,
With the voices singing in our ears, saying
That this was all folly.

Then at dawn we came down to a temperate valley,
Wet, below the snow line, smelling of vegetation;
With a running stream and a water-mill beating the darkness,
And three trees on the low sky,
And an old white horse galloped away in the meadow.
Then we came to a tavern with vine-leaves over the lintel,
Six hands at an open door dicing for pieces of silver,
And feet kicking the empty wine-skins.
But there was no information, and so we continued
And arrived at evening, not a moment too soon
Finding the place; it was (you may say) satisfactory.

All this was a long time ago, I remember,
And I would do it again, but set down
This set down
This: were we lead all that way for
Birth or Death? There was a Birth, certainly,
We had evidence and no doubt. I have seen birth and death,
But had thought they were different; this Birth was
Hard and bitter agony for us, like Death, our death.
We returned to our places, these Kingdoms,

But no longer at ease here, in the old dispensation,
With an alien people clutching their gods.
I should be glad of another death.

T.S.Eliot

Luke 3:15-17,21,22

¹⁵As the people were filled with expectation, and all were questioning in their hearts concerning John, whether he might be the Messiah, ¹⁶John answered all of them by saying, “I baptize you with water; but one who is more powerful than I is coming; I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. ¹⁷His winnowing fork is in his hand, to clear his threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire.”

²¹Now when all the people were baptized, and when Jesus also had been baptized and was praying, the heaven was opened, ²²and the Holy Spirit descended upon him in bodily form like a dove. And a voice came from heaven, “You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.”

This morning Luke's gospel reading asks us to look at Jesus' baptism. To think about this first public proclamation of Jesus' ministry. The language of 'baptism' is part of our church-speak, but it can be a difficult language for the non-churchgoer to understand. Not surprisingly since Christmas I've had several enquiries from parents wanting to arrange a christening for their baby. How do we see 'christening' in relation to baptism?...

Language of 'baptism' (sits better in a culture that values water more than we do).

But the big question for me is 'why did Jesus go to John to get baptised?' Baptism for us is a washing-clean from sin, it's turning to God, being transformed. It's also the first step on the journey of faith for a Christian. Jesus didn't need to do any of this and in Matthew's gospel even John questions why Jesus comes to him. In Luke's gospel John says that he is the forerunner, baptising with water, where Jesus will baptise with fire and the Spirit. So, why do you think that Jesus went to John and was baptised?

There's actually a really easy answer, so obvious that we overlook it. Jesus went to be baptised by John because that was what God asked him to do. It confirmed ancient prophecies. It was a very public environment and wholly appropriate as the setting in which God confirms Jesus' ministry: "you are my beloved son; with you I am well pleased". God asks Jesus to do something, and he does it.

Now, you may have been wondering why I've given you TS Eliot's well-known poem on the journey of the Magi in your Bulletin, after all you celebrated Epiphany last Sunday, and we've leapt ahead this week in the life of Jesus to his baptism and the start of his public ministry. Well, aside from the fact that we are still in Christmas in the church calendar until Candlemass, there is another link. You may notice that the first lines of the poem are in quotes, Eliot is quoting from someone else. I used to think the quotes were there to show that it's one of the Kings speaking. But I found out recently that actually Eliot is quoting directly from a sermon on the nativity that was delivered in 1662 by Launcelot Andrewes. When I found this out I was intrigued, and had a look at this sermon. After describing the journey of the Magi in this way: "A cold coming we had of it,
Just the worst time of the year
For a journey, and such a long journey:
The was deep and the weather sharp,
The very dead of winter."

Andrewes goes on to think about what would happen if the star had appeared in his day, he complains that his congregation wouldn't have just got on with following a star, they would have procrastinated. He says that 'our fashion is to see and see again before we stir a foot, specially if it be to the worship of Christ. Come

such a journey at such a time? No; but fairly have put it off to the spring of the year, till the days are longer, and the ways fairer, and the weather warmer, till better travelling to Christ. Our Epiphany would surely have fallen in Easter week at the soonest.'

Well, I must say I felt that this has a real ring of truth for us today. The Magi's response was to do as they were called to, to follow the star to the stable. Jesus himself goes to John and asks to be baptised, not because he needed the grace given at baptism, but because God had asked him to do this, to allow his public ministry to begin in this way.

And today God asks us to do things, but we often find ourselves putting it off, 'we'll make that journey when the weather is a bit better', 'we'll take that risk at church when we're a bit better off, or when we feel the congregation is growing'. But maybe the time to take the risks is now. Maybe this is what God is calling us to, both as individuals and as a church community. Maybe we have to be more public, more up-front about the ministry that God wants us to be involved with. Maybe this New Year is the time when we need to take seriously what God is calling us to do. Perhaps it will be something we haven't done before, like getting involved with Little Angels, After School Club or one of the other groups associated with the church. Maybe there are other things that we know God is calling us to on our walk as his disciples. And if we heed the call that God makes on our lives, we will indeed find that He is well-pleased with us.