

The Baptism of Christ
Year A - 8/1/2017

Isaiah 42:1-9
Psalm 29
Acts 10:34-43
Matthew 3:13-17

In the name of the Trinity; Creator, Redeemer, and Life-Giver...

Most of us here could talk about what we've done in our lives in the hope of winning our parents' approval... and the success or failure of the same. It clearly matters to us human creatures. It's an almost universal search, and we often go to great lengths... anything really, just to hear mum or dad say, 'Well done... I'm so proud of you!'

At Jesus's baptism by John in the Jordan, the Holy Spirit is accompanied by the divine voice of fatherly approval... 'You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.' It's so beautiful... 'I love you... I delight in you!' or as Eugene Peterson paraphrases it, 'You are my Son, chosen and marked by my love, pride of my life.'

It always strikes me... that Jesus' ministry begins this way; not with a lecture, not with a job description, nothing that even fills in the gaps as he searches to understand what he's supposed to do. No, it begins with this simple heart-filled voice of approval... 'You're my beloved child, and I delight in you!'

Most of us here I suspect grew-up in a disapproving culture... parents and teachers disappointedly pointing out our shortcomings. And church was part of that culture... with clergy proclaiming a God who was frequently disapproving and often angry... with what we did and said... and even the sort of people we were. We were told that if we wanted God's approval, we needed to earn it with improved behaviour... rule-keeping... and belief.

Whereas the consistent teaching of Christ Jesus is that God loves us... each and every one of us... regardless. Jesus seems to have assumed that the voice he heard at his baptism, was for all of us, not just him as some sort of special case. According to Jesus, God has loved us from the moment of creation... God delights in us as a parent over precious children... and while we're always free to reject that love, we can never erase it. God loves us... always has... always will, regardless.

The God of Christ Jesus loves all people. And this loving regard comes as an unconditional gift - we never have to earn it, for it just is... And when we can hear that divine approval... when we can open our heart and our mind to this reality... then we are set free. Free to live full and abundant lives... free to offer ourselves in sacrificial service of others.

Once again, as if we needed further reminders, today's gospel of divine approval reinforces that God is not like us... and the Kingdom does not play by the rules of our society. We're being invited into a very different world... and the doorway is God's approval.

Christ's teaching is of God's love regardless... but it's important that we understand what's being offered here...

1. Divine approval is purely a gift from God. It's not something we've earned by our good works or our cleverness... Nor is it even deserved... It's pure gift... not within our achievement or control. So there's no room for pride... indeed there's only room for amazement, gratitude and wonder.

2. Divine approval does tell us about who we are... our status as precious creations... But this identity is entirely dependent on God... God's love, God's creative act, God's choice to be our loving parent. Apart from that dependent connection with God, we are simply dust. There's no encouragement to narcissism in this dependence... indeed it's about God, not us.

3. And as we see in today's gospel, the voice of divine approval calls Jesus into the recognition of relationship with God ("You are my child")... And calls him into vocation... to work in love of others. So divine approval calls us into relationship not self-absorption... and into service, not into laziness or privilege.

4. God is an approving parent not an indulgent parent. God's love in relationship is demanding and challenging - always calling us to grow. Notice that the immediate outcome of Jesus hearing God's delight... is that he follows this voice, this spirit, into the time of trial in the wilderness.

So it is with us... when we hear the voice of divine approval, we will know that it's a call to travel deeper... and that the road is narrow and full of challenge and suffering. God's approval is unconditional love, but it is tough love! It often takes time and struggle to come to such reality - there's a lot of muck to be cleared out the way.

Yes, it takes time and struggle to come to a place of true acceptance. And there will be some of us here today, who may have an inner voice saying, 'Yes, but that can't be true of me. I've never been good enough. I've done too many bad things. It may be true for everyone else, but it can't be true of me.'

Well, Christ Jesus says it is true for you... and it's time we realised this reality. God loves you regardless... God delights in you.

Hearing the story of Jesus's baptism, I am drawn to marvel at the miracle of that grace which calls us and claims us, too, as beloved children of God. Just as Jesus did, we go down into the waters of baptism and then come up a new person, with a new, wonderful name: Christian. Christ-bearer. One who has been called to carry Christ and his light into the world, rejoicing. Come what will, we are named and claimed as children of Light, before which the darkness flees.

In the name of God. Amen.