

Baptism of Christ 2018

Acts 19: 1 – 7; Mark 1: 4 – 8

“Yes we have no bananas, we have no bananas today.” This lot behind me¹ have no idea what I’m on about, because they’re too young. But I’m only slowly coming to realise, with the sort of change of perspective with increasing age, that I was born in what was the aftermath of the Second World War; so I do know ditties like that. I was brought up with my parents telling me stories about air raid shelters and gas masks and ration coupons; but to me it was just ancient history. They might as well have been talking about Henry VIII or the Battle of Hastings. Because, as L P Hartley said in the opening line of the Go-Between, “the past is foreign country: they do things differently there.” There is a veil between the child’s immediate experience and anything which went before.

I’m staggered to reflect that even I – model of youth that I am – was born just 20 years after V-J day. 20 years is nothing. It’s as recent as 1998 is from today. It’s like yesterday, so no wonder I grew up surrounded by the shared memories of wartime privations and the community spirit with which they were endured . . . and we went round the playground chanting “Yes we have no bananas, we have no bananas today!”

We’re going to be rediscovering something of that culture in these weeks that we’re worshipping in here. We’re going to be pulling together with that plucky Dunkirk spirit. We’ve seen it already. It was just heart-warming to see so many people giving up their Friday to bring across here all the things we need and to shroud everything that’s left in the Priory in sheets of plastic. We’re going to have fun over here. But our worship is going to be impoverished.

We’ve got to be careful when we say that, of course. Because if we find ourselves thinking that we can’t

¹ The choir

The Revd Matthew Pollard, Rector of Bridlington Priory

worship without stained glass and gothic arches, then we're committing idolatry. We can worship God anywhere: in a church hall, in a supermarket, on a bus . . . and if this enforced exclusion from the Priory serves only to remind us of that important theological truth, it will have all been worthwhile.

But, at the same time, the tradition in which we worship is one which engages our senses. We're not like an ultra-protestant sect sitting in rows being preached at. We engage with God and God engages with us through colour and light and music and space and movement. And we're going to feel the deprivation of some of this particularly today and in three weeks' time when we celebrate Candlemas.

Had we been in the Priory, I would have suggested to the church's council, the PCC – because patterns of worship are a council matter, not Rector's diktat – that to celebrate the Baptism of Christ, instead of having Matins, we should have Sung Eucharist; have an

abbreviated sermon; processed or turned to the font; had an act of Thanksgiving of for Baptism; made our confession; and been liberally doused with a sprinkling of blessed water; through which, as the coldness stung our faces, we would be mystically reincorporated into all those blessings of the Holy Spirit which we've heard, from our reading in the Acts of the Apostles, Baptism is all about: God with us, and us with God.

Which seems to me far more appetizing than a long dogmatic sermon about the Baptism of Christ; which, actually, is pretty problematic, anyway. Why does Christ need to be Baptised? What could possibly be conferred on Christ through Baptism that he didn't already have from before the beginning of time?

We've just been celebrating Christmas. We've heard proclaimed again that glorious, resonant prologue to St. John's Gospel: "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God." But now the

Word, or Jesus, seems to be being down-graded to a sort of agent of God, or sub-God, that isn't activated until Commissioned through Baptism. What price the doctrine of the Trinity? How do you square that with a consubstantial, co-eternal, non-hierarchical Trinity? It's got good scriptural warrant. With variations, it's in all four Gospels. But it seems to distort God the Father into an old man in the sky who needs to shout stage directions through the clouds: "You are my Son, the beloved; with you I am well pleased." This is the sort of God atheists don't believe in. And I usually find that I don't believe in the God atheists don't believe in, either.

But we don't need to get hooked up on all this. Let's just give our brains a rest and immerse ourselves in the epiphany, the revelation of the mysterious Truth that, in Jesus, God so thoroughly identifies himself with us that we are caught up in him. and because we're in surroundings that are perhaps a bit more like a Methodist chapel than a church; and we don't have

the trappings for sacramental ritual; let's do so by praying the words our Methodist brothers and sisters across the whole Methodist Connection will be using, in Covenant services on this first Sunday of the year, to re-affirm our commitment to the mutuality of God's covenant with us and our covenant with him:

I am no longer my own but yours.

Put me to what you will,

rank me with whom you will;

put me to doing, put me to suffering;

let me be employed for you or laid aside for you,

exalted for you or brought low for you.

Let me be full, let me be empty,

let me have all things, let me have nothing.

I freely and wholeheartedly yield all things

to your pleasure and disposal.

And now, glorious and blessed God,

Father, Son and Holy Spirit,

you are mine and I am yours.

The Revd Matthew Pollard, Rector of Bridlington Priory

So be it.

And the covenant made on earth,

let it be ratified in heaven.

Amen.