

## **Baptism of Christ 2019 (13.01.19) Evensong**

### **Isaiah 55: 1 – 11; Romans 6: 1 – 11**

In the course of the last 3 or 400 years poor old God's had an increasingly uphill struggle. It's been the conceit of human beings that we should be in charge of understanding everything. Far from revering God as God Almighty, the only role we've begrudgingly allowed God to have is to be the god of the gaps - that is the god of the gaps in our knowledge. And as those have got smaller, God has increasingly got squeezed out. Just park that thought and let me tell you about something that happened before Christmas.

I met up with a friend whom I've not seen for over 30 years, when we were all fresh-faced students. This chap now lives in Estonia. Having spent many years as a lawyer in Russia – and I suspect it's best not to enquire too closely what sort of work British lawyers in Putin's Russia get up to – he now lives in an old manor house in south east Estonia and runs a company

advising on and setting up Estonian crypto-currency exchanges. Just in case there's a marginal possibility that not everybody has had the chance to process that last sentence, I'll say it again more slowly: advising on and setting up crypto-currency exchanges. Whatever you do, don't beat yourself up if you're sitting there wondering what on earth a crypto-currency exchange is!

As he tried to explain – and I have to confess this was at the end of a very long night – I was trying to work out whether I was thoroughly thick or he was talking absolute rubbish. And, actually, I think it may well have been the latter. The fact is we all joshed him for being a dodgy geezer! But in response he became quite philosophical, challenging us to reflect on the philosophical basis of the notion of currency. What is value? What is the value of a £5? I suppose the material value of a £5 note is probably a fraction of a penny, and we can only exchange it for £5 worth of goods because there is an abstract social contract that

we credit it with having the same notional value as those goods.

Up until a few years ago, it might have been possible to dismiss all this as highfaluting waffle. But now it's becoming a real issue. We're entering – indeed we have already entered – the information era. Wealth will not be determined by the control of land, or the control of labour resources, or even the control of money as we have known it: it will be determined by the control of information. And information has no material value.

I remember meeting the Chief Executive of Continuum Books shortly after Kindle e-books were introduced. He was rubbing his hands with glee. It costs a publisher nothing to supply a book to a Kindle device: there are no materials – no paper, no ink – there are no labour costs, no production costs, no storage costs, no transportation costs, no retail infrastructure to be provided - and yet the publisher can charge pounds

and pounds for the product. It may be that we ought to get our heads round some other form of currency to equate to the value we place on the transfer of digital information . . .

Of course we all know that some things are beyond value. Was it the Barclaycard advert that used to go “digital SLR camera £400, designer shoes £200, romantic Italian meal £85, memories priceless”? We can all probably think of something like a precious moment with a grandchild that all the money in the world couldn't buy. Sublimely romantic or sensual moments belong in an altogether different realm of reality. And that's precisely what a life of faith offers as well. In fact it's precisely the language St Paul uses to describe what entering the life of faith is like.

Paul talks of dying to sin and being alive to god in Christ Jesus. He talks of baptism as being a moment of dying within the realm of the reality of this world and becoming the inhabitant of a reality that is located

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elsewhere: “we have been buried with him by baptism into death, so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life.” This newness of life is a dimension of living, a priceless reality, which is entered into at the point of baptism. It gives us a value, a dignity, which refuses to be defined by our material wealth.

This is what Christians read back into and recognise in Isaiah chapter 55. The writer encourages us to “come, buy wine and milk without money and without price.” It’s an invitation to access the non-material dimension of life, the spiritual dimension of life: “come to me; listen so that you may live.” There is a repeated invitation to return to the Lord. It’s an invitation we are most likely to hear, perhaps, in an exclusively spiritual way. But you can’t entirely divorce the spiritual from mundane reality.

If a life in Christ begins at the moment of baptism, the rest, life as we know it has still to be lived for the rest

of our earthly existence. We’ve got to live from Monday to Saturday, as well as seeking religious experiences on a Sunday. There is scholarly debate about just at what point and by whom the 55<sup>th</sup> chapter of Isaiah was written, but it seems the passage we’ve read this evening shouldn’t be simply spiritualised: it speaks of a yearning for renewed political and economic realities as well. A life of faith doesn’t just offer pie in the sky, but a realistic alternative strategy for living life as we know it as well.

As we are entering into a new era of thinking about and quantifying economic value, it may be that God is beginning no longer to be squeezed out by materialism and the conceit of modernism, because materialism is changing in a way that reintegrates God and makes buying wine and milk without money sound not so silly after all.

Amen.