

SERMON PREACHED BY THE REVEREND JONATHAN ANDREW
AT 8 AND 10AM SERVICES OF HOLY COMMUNION
ON 13 JANUARY 2019 – THE BAPTISM OF CHRIST

Isaiah 43:1-7; Acts 8:14-17; Luke 3:15-17, 21-22

Think about it - when did you last tell someone how much you value them, how much they mean to you – how much the world is a better place because they're in it? Some, of us are quite good at affirming other people, but most of us are not. Listen to many parents with their children on the bus, in the supermarket, at the school gate – so often ready to correct and to criticise, but rarely to encourage. Look at the appraisal system in your workplace, in theory it's aimed at getting the best out of people, but generally it's an opportunity for the boss to put the employee in his or her place. Look at the way we deal with shop assistants, carers, repair and delivery men, people who staff call centres – we're always ready to criticise, to undermine, rarely to compliment. It's almost as if we feed our own self-esteem by undermining other people's. And by positive affirming feedback, I don't just mean the facile social niceties, the 'nice sermon vicar' after the service, but real warm support that says "I value you".

I'm at least as bad as everyone else at this, but just occasionally I try to get it right. A few years back I visited a member of our congregation in St Peter's Hospital over Christmas. After our little chat and prayer time, I noticed that the other two people in the ward looked friendly and welcoming and so I went and talked to them, and very soon all three were singing the praises of the wonderful staff who were looking after them so well - not what one always hears about the NHS! So, on my way out, I stopped at the ward desk and asked for a word with the rather depressed-looking nurse in charge. I could see her bracing herself for another bout of moaning – and so the delight (and surprise) in her face when I passed on the message of appreciation was a joy to behold.

Why don't we do this more often? Is it, as I suggested, that we feed our own self-esteem by undermining other people's, or is it that we're afraid that if we give too much praise people will start to get over confident and big-headed? Well, possibly, and there is a terrible danger (not least for us clergy) of being put on a pedestal and believing our own press, but in general I've found that positive feedback spurs people on to even greater efforts, rather than encouraging them to rest on their laurels. And here I must say how much I personally have appreciated the words of support I've received over the last year – it's not been an easy time, but just knowing that people understood that has really helped. When we embarked on this vacancy, I asked all our people here at St Peter's to be generous in their treatment of one other, particularly when things went a bit awry (as inevitably from time to time they would), and as a general rule we have been, despite dodgy sound and heating systems!

Appreciation – approval – endorsement – generosity - even forgiveness: they're all about recognising each other's value as children of God. Today is primarily about the Baptism of Jesus, and especially that voice from heaven endorsing Jesus' ministry 'You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased', but I think we can push it further than that. We can read those words as saying something about the value God sees in each one of us as beings made in his image. Those of us who've read William Young's novel 'The Shack' will remember that whenever the three characters representing God refer to a human being they always say 'ah yes, Jimmy, I'm

particularly fond of him' or 'Suzie, I'm particularly fond of her'. Each of us is special in God's eyes.

Listen again to the words of our Old Testament reading and you'll understand why we hear it this morning:

... thus says the LORD, who created you:
Do not fear, for I have redeemed you;
I have called you by name, you are mine.
(You are special)

When you pass through the waters, I will be with you;
... when you walk through fire you shall not be burned. *(I'll keep you safe)*

For I am the LORD your God,
the Holy One of Israel, your Saviour.
(I'm on your side)

I give Egypt as your ransom,
... nations in exchange for your life.
(Nothing is more valuable than you are)

Do not fear, for I am with you; ... I will gather you;
I will ... bring my sons ... and my daughters
from the end of the earth
(I won't let you go)

everyone who is called by my name,
whom I created for my glory,
whom I formed and made.'
(You are mine)

And so, moving on to our gospel reading, let me ask you to imagine the scene in your mind's eye – the crowd of people gathered on the river bank, listening to John preaching and then shuffling forward to be baptised one by one. Down the ages people have asked why Jesus, the sinless one, needed baptism, but perhaps in our mind-picture we see the answer to the question – Jesus is standing in line with us - God is associating himself fully with our sin and our need for cleansing, for healing, for redemption.

And so we see ourselves loved and valued - through our own baptisms washed clean, like those lined up at the bank of the Jordan waiting for John the Baptist. Like those Samaritans baptised by the two apostles in our second reading, we too are special and affirmed, we too are people of whom God is 'particularly fond'.

And if God sees us like that, should we not also see one another in a new light, as beings who with all our faults are of infinite value?

'I have called you by name, you are mine.'

Amen