

Sermon at the Cathedral Eucharist

Baptism of Christ

readings: [Isaiah 43.1-7](#), [Acts 8.14-17](#)

9 January 2022

Probably for all of us, there are seemingly tiny episodes in our lives that stay with us because of the impact they have.

I recall one such moment from my early twenties when I was queueing up for something and I became aware of a person in a parallel queue looking in my direction. On making eye contact, he pointed his finger directly at me and said, 'Adam'.

I looked at him rather uncertainly, wondering who was this strange man pointing at me and calling out my name. And then the penny suddenly dropped, and I said 'Mr Davies'.

Ken Davies had been my teacher during the first two years of junior school, an extraordinary person in lots of ways, controversial at times, but full of creativity and imagination, who had had us doing all sorts of things of which our contemporaries in adjacent classes were envious. At the point of our encounter, though, we hadn't seen one another for about fifteen years and I'd gone through all sorts of physical changes in the meantime. Yet here, a decade and a half later, I was greatly struck by the fact that my old teacher recognised me and remembered my name.

Such an experience was hugely affirming for me and alerted me to how important it can be for any of us when our name is remembered. Conversely how awkward and uncomfortable, and at times how painful it can be when our name is forgotten or mispronounced or, worse still, ridiculed.

In our Old Testament reading, the prophet Isaiah is addressing the whole people of Israel. "Thus says the Lord", he says, 'Do not fear for I have redeemed you, I have called you by name, you are mine.'" It is an enormous encouragement for the people and for who they are at a particularly difficult time in their history when they were afraid that circumstances might overwhelm them.

Some of you may be familiar with what is known as Ignatian spirituality. It's a pattern of prayer within the Christian tradition, going back about five hundred years, that works with our imagination. It does so by inviting us to inhabit Biblical passages, placing ourselves within them and seeing ourselves as being directly addressed. This particular Isaiah passage is often used as an opening text on an Ignatian retreat, in which the person is asked to hear their own name being said within this verse. Having been on a fair few such retreats in my time, I've often spent the first day, allowing myself to hear the phrase - 'Adam, do not fear, I have called you by name, you are mine', and hearing that phrase over and over again so that it might penetrate my being at deeper and deeper levels. It's something you might want to try for yourselves in your times of prayer or quiet reflection.

Today, the Church celebrates the Baptism of Christ, and in our Gospel, we hear addressed to Jesus, those words 'You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased'; words of affirmation and encouragement, as he emerges from the baptismal waters and is thus launched upon his ministry. Jesus chooses to have himself baptised. It's a choice by him to engage with the reality of God's love, rooted in something elemental, water, the very thing on which we are utterly dependent for our lives; a choice by Jesus to encounter a very tangible expression of God's recognition of him and of God's commitment to him. And doing it so publicly, it was a sign to those gathered as well as to us that it is something into which we are all invited to enter more deeply, to own our own baptism more fully, to engage with a place where we are affirmed and called God's children, a place where we are known by name.

The contemporary American novelist, Marilynne Robinson, may be known to some of you, her work being heavily influenced by her deeply held faith. If she's an unfamiliar name, you can do many worse things in life than spend time reading her novels. In recent years, she has produced an award-winning trilogy, set in 1950's America, in the fictional town of Gilead.

The third volume in the series is called 'Lila' which tells the story of a widowed congregationalist minister in his late 60's, Revd Ames, & his encounter with a young woman who has slipped into his church

to get out of the rain. This is Lila, who has survived an awfully bleak background, abandoned on several occasions in her childhood & who is now living a transitory life.

She feels a great sense of shame about who she is, and when attending the Sunday services, she always sits in the back row, so that no one can see her, fearing that she would be judged if they did.

Whilst out walking, one day, with Revd Ames, she asks him about the possibility of baptism. She says, "no one seen to it for me when I was a child, I been feeling the lack of it."

However, she is very nervous about being baptized in church fearing, 'people would look at her all the time to see if she's measured up.' The minister, only too aware of her deep sense of insecurity & shame, says that he could baptise her right there, in the field, with water from her bucket.

'Yes?' she says, 'then hold on.'" Lila then goes to her shack & changes into a clean blouse before returning. Ames duly baptizes her, resting his hand 3 times on her hair; & she bursts into tears. The whole scene is conveyed with huge insight & tenderness.

Lila's story is of someone frightened yet desperately wanting to connect more deeply, painfully aware that the things she had once used to protect her life from others - fear, a resistance to trust - products of terrible childhood experiences, were now the very things that prevented her from being drawn into relationship, of being called & known by name. And the tears following her baptism hint at an opening up to a deeper reality, the deeper reality of love.

I think it's fair to say that Lila's story, to lesser or greater degrees, has some truth in it for all of us, with our reluctance to own all who we are and to place it all into God's hands for its transforming.

And so, on this day of celebrating Christ's baptism, in which Jesus owned who he was and that to which God was calling him, so may we seek to journey more fully into the reality of our own baptism, to a place where we find ourselves in Christ, cleansed and refreshed & given life. To a place where we are affirmed as children of God, to where we are known and where we are called by our name.

The Revd Adam Dickens, University and Cathedral Chaplain