

Send Forth Your Spirit
Baptism of the Lord, Year B
11 January 2009

When the charismatic movement hit St John's Rangiora in my youth the new Vicar began a custom we had not seen before. On parish picnics and like occasions he would baptise in adjacent swimming pools. With the kind of mind I have I used to wonder about a follow on sacramental difficulty. If the priest had used the prayer book formulary then he would have invoked the Holy Spirit's presence on the water, thereby creating hundreds of gallons of holy water. What would be the effect on all who swam in that pool thereafter, and what would happen to the land on to which the water was released at the end of the swimming season?

This kind of whimsical thinking is typical of me. Every time I drive past the drying ponds at Grassmere I think about the possibility that if there were enough de-salinisation plants like this in the world would the oceans lose their saltiness?

The Christian world is divided between those who believe that the word of God is addressed only to human beings – that faith is a matter of hearing, understanding and obeying – so that only human beings can be saved – and those who believe that God is also interested in the world of matter – and that the non-human creation also has a place in his final scheme of things. It was fascinating to watch the grass roots revolt of animal lovers at a theology conference in Dunedin two years ago when Professor John Webster, a well known Barthian scholar, firmly told the assembled multitudes that the Bible spoke only about the eternal destiny of human beings, that we are the species that are the focus of its interests.

It is interesting how often the Saints are supposed to have had special relationships with animals. My own patron Saint, Hugh, Bishop of Lincoln, is often depicted as being followed by a Swan, with a miniature chain around its neck. In fact he did have such a pet Swan at the monastery in the West Country where he was abbot, and it was often in his company. And the great Staretz of 19th century Russia, Seraphim of Sarov, is supposed to have lived in a state of peaceful co-existence with the bears in the forest, despite the fact that one of these lumbering, aggressive beasts had mauled him at the start of his solitary, hermitage life.

There is more at stake here than charming pet stories from the lives of the saints. All life forms on this planet are interconnected at many levels – this is perhaps our most important learning from the theory of evolution. That means that as we move either towards or away from God in our life of faith we can no longer regard the creation, the world of nature, as just a back drop, a kind of stage set, to our drama of salvation. The created order has thrown too many grappling hooks over us for us to just abstract ourselves from it, and to sail on majestically alone in our voyage of homecoming return to God.

The current ecological crisis too has taught our many responsibilities to the creation – that selfish, misguided choices in our life styles can have immense destructive consequences for other life forms on the planet – consequences that can come back to haunt us and hinder us in outcomes ranging from drought to disturbed weather patterns. There is a strand in Christian theology that talks about our vocation to be the priests of creation, its steward, its caretaker, and its representative before

God. You could argue that we are discovering this vocation the hard way.

Christians who observe nature closely, who are keenly interested in its ways, would often want to echo Gerard Manly Hopkins observations in that poem on the front cover of today's Grapevine that, "The world is charged with the grandeur of God." Despite all that humankind does to mess that creation up there seems to be an inexhaustible vitality in nature that speaks of the Divine reality who first created it. There is within it a "dearest freshness deep down things...because the Holy Ghost over the bent' world broods with warm breast and with ah! bright wings."

Pavel Florensky, a scientist, a priest, and a martyr under the regime of Bolshevik Russia put it another way – "There is no such thing as dead or inert matter."

When Jesus descends into the waters of the Jordan to be baptised this is his personal Pentecost. The Spirit of God anoints him and equips him with the Divine resources to make his ministry effective. We might notice that the miracles of Jesus don't just include healing the sick and exorcising the possessed, but also calming storms and walking on water. He will reveal himself as master of the forces of nature.

The spirit that descends on him is that same Spirit that brooded over the waters of creation to lead out the evolving processes of life on earth. This is the creator Spirit that sustains all life forms on earth minute by minute. One of the psalms has a phrase that is often used on the feast of Pentecost – "Send forth your Spirit, and you will renew the face of the earth."

As we read the Bible from beginning to end we can notice a pattern of the Holy Spirit steadily increasing its wattage in the way it connects with who and what it has made. At first it inspires the musicians and artisans who beautify Temple worship. The Shepherd Kings of Israel are drawn in to their vocation of political leadership at its prompting. Then at a new level of relationship the prophets are indwelt by that same Spirit to challenge the children of Israel to live out their vocation to be the people of God a new depth, and at an increased level of ethical responsibility and holiness of life. This is after all the Holy Spirit, above all the source of moral renewal, for without holiness of life no one can get close to God, since like sees like.

Then at the next degree of connection the Holy Spirit conceives Jesus in the womb of the Virgin Mary. Now at his baptism the Holy Spirit gives gifts for ministry. The other key epiphany points of the Spirit's self disclosure will be the way he illuminates Jesus at the Transfiguration to reveal clearly his divine nature, and his future destiny of suffering on the cross. Then in his mighty power the Holy Spirit lights on the dead body of Jesus to raise him from the dead. And equal in importance there is the way the Spirit descends not just as spiritual gifts but also in his own person on the day of Pentecost.

All of this has consequences for God's relationship with the world of matter. At present matter is a poor conductor of Divine grace. Yet from the time of Christ's life, death and resurrection, small parts of the natural order become used by the Church in its sacraments to be visible signs of Christ's presence in our lives. The water of baptism, the bread and wine of communion, the loving hearts of a couple in

marriage – these are as it were moved in a symbolic sense into God’s future fulfilled time and return to us as parts of the natural order now alive with God’s overflowing life to make his love powerfully present in the lives of baptised Christians.

The Church also blesses other things, wedding rings, and new harvests of agricultural produce, churches, and houses where Christians live. Churches of this kind are obvious in their sense of Divine presence. The prayer and the worship that has gone on here over generations, the way it has been designed, the banners, stained glass windows, altars, candles and incense make it more than just a building – rather here this collection of matter has become a focus for the presence of God.

There are other more controversial things the Church blesses too. I remember in my training parish the evensong when the senior curate preached on whether it was legitimate for naval chaplains to bless nuclear submarines and warships - on the whole yes in his opinion – a conclusion that infuriated my training Vicar, an ageing hippy from the 1960’s.

Sergius Bulgakov, a 20th century Russian theologian thought about these things a lot. His conclusion was that at present the Holy Spirit is present in our world in a self limiting way, choosing only to enter the lives, spaces and places where he is welcomed and acknowledged. He will not force himself on anyone. But at the second coming, at the final fulfilment time of God’s purposes, when heaven is wedded to earth, the Holy Spirit as Divine grace will irradiate the creation, will light it up as uncreated light, will transform matter, just as Jesus was transfigured at the Transfiguration. Then the world

of matter will be totally open to the action of Divine grace. In that sense the gospel scene of the Transfiguration is anticipation and first fruits of the way everything will be in our world at this wonderful end time.

That is why I am left wondering if the baptism of Jesus was a small first step in that process of transforming matter. On the walls of Holy Trinity Lyttelton the 19th century Vicar Canon Coates painted the baptism of Christ as a scene taking place at dusk, with the dark water around Jesus glittering with small diamonds of light, just as all the water does in the harbour basin between Lyttelton and Diamond harbour for much of the summer months. As the Spirit filled body of Jesus came into contact with the waters of the Jordan River, as they flowed around him did this amazing event have any significance for the forces of nature too? Maybe without realising it the charismatic Vicar of Rangiora back in the 1970's was on to something significant about God's relationship with the world of matter as he went about generating all those hundreds of gallons of holy water in local swimming pools.