

Baptism
8 July 2018
Mark 6.1-6

I admit to being biased, but my personal prejudice makes no difference to the fact that Beatrice is a beautiful name. It is, perhaps, the archetypal Christian name because its meaning – blessed – reminds us instantly of the beginning of the Sermon on the Mount. The same Latin word – beatus, blessed – has given its name to that beginning, the sayings we call the beatitudes. Blessed are the poor in spirit: for theirs is the kingdom of Heaven. Blessed are those who mourn: for they will be comforted. Blessed are the meek: for they will inherit the earth, and so on. It is not a coincidence that Steven, Bishop of Oxford, has asked us to place these words at the centre of our lives as a church, because they represent what it means to fulfil the calling of every Christian, the calling to become more like Christ.

It is also not a coincidence that the greatest of all Christian poems, Dante's Divine Comedy, sees the great Latin poet Vergil replaced as Dante's guide by Beatrice, the blessed one who will guide him through purgatory and into paradise, to the place of the beatific vision, the face to face knowledge of God known only to the blessed. That old pronunciation "blesséd" is more rarely heard these days, and associated by some only with an ageing actor with a huge beard and an even huger voice. But when reading the psalms or the gospels, I find the monosyllabic "blessed", fails to carry the weight and the resonance of this most Christian of words. "Blessed are you among women", says Elizabeth to no less a person than the mother of God. To be blessed is to have received the grace of God and to have been transformed by the divine life which that grace imparts.

So Beatrice has been blessed by her name. She is already blessed, because she is beloved of God, and also of course because she is beloved of her parents and grandparents and all those around her. Today we take that blessing one stage further by making her not just

blessed, but blessed, she receives the grace of God in a new way in this sacrament of baptism. By the celebration we share with her today, and the symbolic actions we perform, we enact the gift of God to her and to every Christian – whether one year or a hundred years old – as she is united to the life of Christ and welcomed into the church which is his body.

We mark this momentous event in three ways. First of all, Beatrice will be anointed on the forehead with the sign of the cross, the sign of Christian identity. This symbolic marker is the badge of those who are *beati*, the blessed ones. Beatrice is being claimed by Christ as one of his own children. It is a claim and a sign which is indelible: nothing can take from Beatrice the grace which God showers upon her.

We often think of baptism simply as an act which involves water. The earliest people to be baptised were, of course, adults, and the dramatic act of descending under water in order to be raised up is a powerful symbol which the church of the West has given up too

easily. Three times the water will be poured over Beatrice's head, as she is baptised in the name of Father, Son and Holy Spirit, and as we symbolically drown her - for that is what we're doing - we are also, symbolically, and extraordinarily, placing her three times in the tomb of Christ. In the name of the Father - into the tomb with Christ on the Friday; and of the Son - into the tomb with Christ on the Saturday; and of the Holy Spirit - into the tomb again on the Sunday and then up, out from the death of human weakness into the life of God's perfect love. When Bea has received the waters of baptism she is then anointed again, this time with the oil of chrism, the sign by which the gift of the Holy Spirit is sealed within her as the beloved child of God, as one of the blessed.

At the end of mass, Beatrice will be given a candle, a candle which has been lit from the Easter Candle which stands beside our high altar. That candle began its life as it was carried - a single light - into the darkness of the bare and empty church at the beginning of the Easter Vigil service. It is the pillar of fire which marks

our Lord's Passover from death to life, the Passover into which each of us was baptised and in which we live as Christians. That light of life is now passed on again, to another of Christ's Easter people, who will live and grow and walk in that light.

The gift of baptism is the gift of Christ. In the incarnation, death and resurrection of Jesus, everything about the human race has been embraced and transformed by the Son of God who lifts us up, in his flesh, to the Father. We celebrate the fact that the glorified humanity which intercedes for us eternally also calls us, draws us, into its own perfect offering, nourishing us in the eucharist with bread which sustains the life we are given at Baptism – the resurrection life of the Easter, and the Pentecostal life of the Spirit.

To live this new life means to be folded into the love of God, to be taken into that perfect community where to live is simply to love and to be loved. And this is the heart of our faith: being enveloped and embraced by

perfect love is what it means to be baptised, for love is what God is. As we bring another of God's children to baptism, we celebrate what it means to be a Christian, what it means to be blessed by God; what it means to be one of the blessed.