

Mtt 3:13-17 Chad's 110126

Last Sunday we explored the Epiphany or revelation of God's gift of faith in his loving relationship with each of us, a gift which in advertising parlance 'keeps on giving'.

And just over a fortnight ago at Christmas, we celebrated the source of that relationship, God's first epiphany to us, in the gift himself in human form, in the baby Jesus.

Now today, as we come to the end of the Christmas season, we celebrate the third great epiphany in the Baptism of Jesus, wherein Jesus is empowered by the spirit of God & his mission is revealed. As such this is a moment of the future – Jesus' new beginning. Through the person of Jesus, God will reach out to his people in a new way! And this spirit that empowered Jesus to make his new beginning is the same spirit that empowers us in our baptism, to live out our faith relationship with God through Christ. /

But this moment of baptism, this empowerment in the spirit, is not a one-off event – it is a lifelong call to new beginnings in him!

So how do you feel about God's call to you at baptism when you see it in this way – an everlasting & ongoing new beginning in him? A bit challenged/overawed? Well what about excited?

I have to say that still, at the age of 79, I'm still personally excited at God's call to new beginning in my faith journey – excited for myself and our St Chad's church family! I was sharing this sense of excitement with the Clergy colleague recently and I was alarmed to hear him respond, 'excitement is for kids. I am too old to get excited about anything these days. There's nothing to be excited about!'

I well remember my excitement as a child, and I saw such excitement one Christmas as I joined with the Polish branch of our family for the Christmas eve celebrations. The young children had been taken out for a walk to look for the first star in the night sky which would herald the arrival Santa Claus - & returned to find the Christmas tree 'mysteriously' surrounded by colourfully wrapped gifts! There were great skills of glee, with one of the youngest children alternately jumping up and down on the spot, then running frenetically around the small space! It was quite a spectacle.

I don't get quite that excited these days and I guess it's just as well. But I do get excited by surprises 'new experiences'.

Now some Clergy might say that as Christians, worldly things or pleasures are not things we should get excited about. After all, part of our Scriptures remind us that we are to leave behind all worldly pleasures, to do the work that we are commissioned to do in our baptism, in bringing love, joy and peace to others. And it must be said that 'excitement' is not a term that is used in the translations of the Scriptures that we commonly use in church. But other words with a similar meaning of 'great enthusiasm or eagerness' are common in our Bible – notably the term 'rejoicing', while the themes of 'exhilaration' & exhalation run constantly through God's Word. So overall our Scriptures do call us to be full of excitement and joy as a part of the human condition, how God created us, & what he created us to do in his name - & that of course includes our relationships. I get excited about catching up with old friends I haven't seen for some time - and joy is very much a part of our gatherings with all of our family and friends! So our relationship with God, our faith, should also be full of joy and excitement.

Are you excited in your relationship with God, in your faith? You know I think that sometimes our excitement in our faith, or rather our lack of excitement, is due to our image of God, how we see God. As a child I was sent to Sunday school by my parents, where my lovely young teacher excited me with the action- filled colourful stories from the Bible. But my excitement was short lived when, as a young person, I grew up in a very staid Church in Sydney. My image of God was of a static, grey-bearded old man, sitting on a great throne above the clouds. And if this was so, I reasoned, this God could not be very active or involved in my life! And a very conservative congregation reinforced that image! In time this staid image of God drained me of any emotion or enthusiasm indeed any excitement in my faith journey. It was a poor start. I suppose I reasoned that if God is static, and his people are static, then I can be static in return. Have you ever been to the church like that?/

And it was not until much later in my life journey, as a grown man with my family, When we joined with a church with a more relational understanding of the Scriptures, that I rediscovered that even the Hebrews of the old Testament has more lively images of God, wherein something more of his divine nature was revealed, firstly to the prophets, then through Christ, and consequently, to me! There God is a magnificent creator of giraffes and galaxies, fish & fleas, sun and rain. God is shown as active, involved, intensely interested in people. If they are in trouble, God will be there with them, carrying them through the struggles./

In the mysterious name 'I am' (Ex3:14) is concealed all the living images of a saviour, healer & defender. As Job discovers, God is free, God is majestic and mysterious. God knows nothing of the distinction between young or old, nor the boundaries of one's sexuality or abilities. God is light, joy, beauty, boundless creativity, always doing

new things, God is exciting (Isaiah 48:6). Then the best image I think: God as the great lover as in the Song of Songs where the lover rejoices, delights endlessly, and shares everything with the beloved.

And then in the New Testament, in the incarnation, the birth of his son the baby Jesus, God becomes inexpressively close to humankind, in person, as lovers do. And the words of our gospel this morning affirm Jesus as God's son, his love amongst us. 'You are my son, the beloved, with you I am well pleased. The early Christians knew God's love in Christ as they realized the meaning of Jesus' words: 'as the Father has loved me, so I have loved you, abide in my love' (John 15:8). And their joy, their excitement, caused the church to grow expediently across the known world throughout the first millennium.

We too can know God's Word to Jesus: 'you are my daughter/son whom I love very much. RPT Now surely that is exciting to you!'

As we can begin a new year then, let us get off to a good start by refreshing our images of God. Let us exchange our tired old images of God for those that offer freshness, life, energy & love - and of course excitement – an excitement in which we enthusiastically live out our own baptismal promises, in reflecting his life, energy and love for each other, and those around us in our community & across the world.

For as said at the outset, our baptism is not the only time we are empowered by the spirit. The great mediaeval theologian Thomas Aquinas spoke of 'new sending in this Spirit, times of grace throughout life, when God enlivens us as individuals and as his Church, in special ways for ongoing & special ways tasks. For the Spirit does not retire at baptism. I repeat, the spirit does not retire at the baptism.

I believe that we, as the St Chad's family, have been called to be church in a new & exciting way in this community. And I would encourage you to search out how you, each with your own unique gifts, can be a part of an exciting & new beginning for our St Chad's family,

So my I leave you with Paul's words from his Letter to the Romans: "May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that you may abound in hope by the power if the Holy Spirit".(15:13)