

St Mary Abbots

Zephaniah 3:14-end

Luke 3:7-18

Father Christopher

In our readings today there is a sense both of waiting in expectation, and of celebration now. How appropriate that is for a baptism in Advent!

'Sing aloud O daughter Zion; shout O Israel!

Rejoice and exult with all your heart, O daughter Jerusalem!' says Zephaniah, though that is still only imagining the joy at the coming of the Messiah.

John the Baptist's message is rather harder to hear, and not one I often shout out in Kensington High Street:

'You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath that is to come? Bear fruits worthy of repentance.'

People do not turn away though, but are filled with expectation, asking him what they should do.

As well as our readings being about both the here and now, and looking forward, in hope and expectation, all of the sacraments do the same.

While baptism is the formal admission of Ran, Leo and Florence to membership of the Church of God, we of course also believe that God has been active in their lives up to this moment.

We believe that the Holy Spirit is given in baptism, having confidence that He will be active in their lives as they go forward in the faith.

That is not to say that the Holy Spirit has not already been active in bringing them to this point. Just as one might hope that a couple coming to marriage have already been fostering the gift of love, and already had a degree of commitment.

But the sacraments act as a kind of seal, an outward sign of what we believe God is doing in their lives, as well as giving us confidence in that gift.

That gift is not just a one-off bestowal of the Holy Spirit in a few moments' time either, but what we hope and pray will be the start of a constantly flowing spring of grace in their lives.

It is also a new beginning, as they are cleansed of their sins and begin a new life as our brothers and sisters in Christ. They, like all of us, will sin again, and no doubt again and again, but will, we pray, begin a lifelong habit of returning for God's forgiveness and grace, as they seek daily to be transformed by His love.

As John the Baptist tells his hearers however, this is not just a matter of personal spiritual cleansing. When the crowd asks what they must do to 'bear fruits worthy of repentance', he gives them very clear instructions:

'Whoever has two coats must share with anyone who has none; and whoever has food must do likewise.'

And he told tax collectors and soldiers not to abuse their power.

But why are they fruits of repentance, rather than say just fruits of charity?

Because all sin is, at root, the love of self, rather than the love of God or neighbour; to be turned in on oneself, rather than to be turned outwards towards others.

Repentance means turning around literally, turning away from our sins. And if we turn away from our selfishness, that necessarily means loving others, and serving them, and, in doing so, serving Christ, the one whom the Baptist tells his hearers will baptise with the Holy Spirit and with fire.

Perhaps rather heavy for a baptism, but in Advent we don't just await Jesus's coming as a baby, but as our judge, revealing what is in our hearts.

As the newest Christians in the world, for a split second, shortly, and as the newest members of our community here, we will look to you Florence, Leo and Ran, as our examples and our guides, as you receive the gift of the Holy Spirit, and we all pray for a renewing of that gift in each of us.

As we await the coming of 'God With Us', in the form of a fragile baby, let us also pray for the fruits of repentance, that we might devote our lives to love and care of others, rather than ourselves; and so that we, with Leo, Florence and Ran, might be ready when he comes. Amen