

13/01/13 Baptism of Christ
Isaiah 43.1-7; Acts 8.14-17; Luke 3.15-17,21-22

I baptise you with water, but one who is more powerful than I, is coming...He will baptise you with the Holy Spirit and with fire.

With deliberate dramatic irony, Luke contrasts the ministry of John the Baptist with his coming successor, Jesus. The irony for us as a modern-day audience of course, being that we know Jesus has already come and that his ministry will be launched by John the Baptist himself.

In the liturgical calendar, we have skipped seamlessly from Jesus the infant, revealed to the world at Epiphany, to Jesus the young adult, about to begin his three-year ministry on Earth. A ministry that John the Baptist describes as one of the Holy Spirit and of fire. In fact, John goes on to say that Jesus' ministry will gather the wheat, the faithful, in to God's barns, but the chaff, those with only an outer husk of religion, will be burnt in an unquenchable fire. It will be a ministry of divine inspiration and divine judgement.

These days, we tend to skip over God's fire and concentrate on the Holy Spirit. The phrase, fire and brimstone, originates from the King James' translation and '*fire and brimstone preachers*' are a bit out of fashion these days, possibly even a bit of a joke; but I thought it might be worth dwelling on what we mean by God's fiery judgment.

Brimstone, or 'brimstun' as it is apparently correctly pronounced, is a substance named in the Old Testament, usually to describe God's judgment on the unfaithful (e.g. Deut. 29:23; Job 18:5; Ps 11: 6; Ezek. 38:22). God's breath of judgment is described as 'a steam of brimstone' in Isaiah (Isa 30:33) It features again in the New Testament (Lk. 17:29; Rev. 9:17) where Satan and his followers are thrown alive into a lake of brimstone to burn forever, in the book of Revelation (Rev 19: 21).

Brimstone is a sulphurous substance found in deposits around the Dead Sea among other places. When struck by lightning, or otherwise ignited, it catches fire, sending up acidic plumes of sulphur dioxide. A terrifying and potentially lethal event for anyone living nearby.

So, when we hear familiar biblical metaphors about God judging humanity with fires and sending down brimstone, I wonder what we imagine? Is this a God who judges the world by exacting sadistic revenge for the evil in mankind? One who wants some people to burn forever, in eternal torment?

In past ages, and in some places still, people assume these images are real, and live in terror that they too, might be found worthless in God's eyes, and thrown into a fiery pit of judgement.

In days and places where physical punishment, even at home towards women or children is considered normal, and a sentence of death for crimes is acceptable, some peoples' view of God will be similar: a God who judges with anger and violence.

But this leaves us with a quandary. How do we read such verses? Do we really believe that God is sadistic? What kind of God tortures people forever, to exact judgement and what kind of justice is that?

One difficulty we face here is the merging of two views of God and two different models of justice, which both run as threads through the Bible. One depicts God as angry, vindictive and merciless. This God exacts an 'eye for an eye', which, however merciful for being proportional, reflects the kind of God who equates justice with pain and violent retribution. The other thread shows a God of mercy, who offers us a way back, encouraging our growth in godliness with endless forgiveness and love. Try as we might, these two views sit side by side and cannot be reconciled. It is not enough to say that one comes from the Old Testament and the other from the New, because even in this passage, both are evident, and both continue to be present, right through to the book of Revelation.

For those of us who like our Biblical theology to be tidy, this is uncomfortable, but perhaps it reflects something about the way we all sometimes swing between angry desires for retribution and a calmer, more integrated approach to justice.

We have to remind ourselves that how we read the Bible affects our understanding of *who* God is, and how God acts. Some people believe God's judgment will come with actual brimstone and that in the afterlife, evil people will really burn forever in an actual fire, in a real place called hell. Others take these images as symbolic; as words to describe how seriously God takes evil in the world, but not to the point of eternally torturing people in a physical hell, located somewhere in the universe.

In some ways, the meeting between John the Baptist and Jesus is an encounter between two very different views of God. John goes about in his hair shirt, eating locusts; Jesus eats and drinks with sinners and makes wine at weddings for everyone to celebrate with. John seems to be the religious extremist and Jesus the more moderate figure. Both are first century Jews, well versed in scripture, but one, John, is more of a literalist, emphasising that if people do not repent, they will be thrown out and burnt with the rubbish. Jesus at times, also speaks this way, but at other times, Jesus takes a step back, as if he is considering the bigger picture, balancing God's justice with God's mercy, reminding us that the fundamental rule of God's law is not fear, but love.

And it is Jesus who has the bigger picture, the knowledge of how God's law and God's love is ultimately resolved in the gift of his own life.

Jesus' death and resurrection, as God's Son, is the means by which God judges the world and by which, we also gain God's mercy.

This truth is foreshadowed by Jesus accepting a baptism from John. Jesus goes into the water and rises again, in a symbolic enactment of his own death and resurrection. Of course, John does not know this, because when he meets Jesus, all this lies in the future. But Jesus' baptism is a sign and a promise of what is to come. (See also Acts 19 1-7, where some believers know only John's baptism).

This is why baptism is a sacrament that we all undergo, to become members of the body of Christ. We too, enact a symbolic death, through water, to share with Jesus his death and resurrection. We are washed in physical water and receive the Holy Spirit as God's promise; the Holy Spirit by whom, we receive new life and grow in faith.

Baptism is for us a sign of God's judgement on evil, but also God's mercy, because through faith, we gain a way back to God. Many religions have a theology of judgement, but Christ is unique in bringing us a theology of *forgiveness*; a gift we see physically enacted in the sacrament of baptism.

So, as we remember Jesus' baptism today, let us celebrate his gift to us, a baptism in water and gift of the fire of the Holy Spirit, that ignites and inspires us, and brings us to new life. And let us all be thankful for that gift of love.

Amen.