

Do you baptise goldfish?
A sermon for the Baptism of Christ

Some years ago, when I lived in a Vicarage, the phone rang and a voice said, *“Hello, I’d like to arrange a christening.”* Next came the question: *“Do you baptise goldfish?”* It was, of course, a friend of mine –himself a priest and it was how he often used to open his conversation on the telephone. *“Do you baptise goldfish?”*

It reminded me of a huge tapestry I have seen many times which hangs in a monastery. The bottom part of it is a great river, full of many fish. The hanging must stretch twenty or thirty feet. Into this river which runs along the bottom flow many streams. Up above on one side is the figure of Moses striking the rock, -the famous story at Massah & Meribah -and from the rock gushes a stream of water pouring down into the great river which runs beneath. A little further along is Ezekiel’s vision of the Temple and flowing from it –a life giving stream. This too joins the river. At the centre of the picture is the cross of Christ, and the water comes from his side -as St. John tells us. This also joins the river. Also –near the cross - is the Baptism of Christ; our theme for today. Finally there is the heavenly vision of the new Jerusalem from the Book of Revelation. Flowing through the streets is the river of life again joining the great river which unites the whole picture.

This great tapestry is a work of art showing as it does in rich symbolic form the story of our salvation. The numerous little fish which swarm throughout this picture are you and me. The little fish is the Christian soul. *“Do you baptise goldfish?”* Choosing to live as a Christian is to live an immersed life. Like the little fish. we are to live immersed, surrounded, held in the love of God.

Think of those words of Isaiah that we heard this morning. *“Fear not, for I have redeemed you, I have called you by name; you are mine. When you pass through the waters, I will be with you...”*. These words were said to people who had lost everything. They had lost their country, their home, they were exiles in a strange land. But God says to them, *“I have called you by name; you are mine”*. Here is an invitation to live within that love, immersed in that love, despite outward circumstances. *“Do you baptise goldfish?”* We are called to live immersed in the love of God. Jesus was immersed in the River Jordan, and what

was the first words that he heard? *"You are my Son, the beloved"* To live the immersed life, the baptised life is to know ourselves beloved, surrounded, held in the love of God, not through any merit of our own, but simply because that is what God is like.

There is of course, another world in which we can live, a world without God, a world devoid of that love. It is the world of our prevailing culture. A journalist, writing after a period of serious illness was reflecting on his experience, and his view was typical of many. Life is so precious, he wrote, because it's all we have, a little spark between two infinities of darkness. He quoted the Anglo-Saxon story of the little swallow which flies in to the great hall at one end and then flies out at the other end; out into the darkness. That is life; that brief flit through the hall before we pass out into darkness.

Or think of that Monty Python song, *"Always look on the bright side of life"*. "Life is quite absurd, and death's the final word". Or John Lennon's "Imagine". *"Imagine there's no heaven; it's easy if you try..."* Or if your cultural tastes are different, think of Samuel Becket's *"Waiting for Godot."* When I went to see it, as a student, I went home at the interval thinking it was over, but the second half, I'm told, is much like the first. Nothing much happens....Or if you're a really serious person, you might read Nietzsche.

A world without God is a rather bleak world; it's a very different world from the world of faith. In the words of the children in Mary Poppins (the original film) as they look up the chimney, *"Oh it's awfully dark and gloomy up there."* Forget about Dick Van Dyke and the dancing chimney sweeps; a life without God is a world rather dark and dismal. Life, on this reckoning is fundamentally absurd. It has no ultimate meaning. The Universe is simply a fact. Life and consciousness are merely accidental products of blind chance. We are just atoms, and that's it!

This is the prevailing view, not only of the educated, but increasingly the popular view. The Christian faith –as we all know–has even in our lifetime slipped away from the centre of our culture. Life outside of the waters of baptism, outside of the river of life is dark indeed, and many people (in good conscience) cannot bring themselves to enter the water through baptism. To them, the immersed life, the life of faith is mere fantasy. This is the fundamental problem that the Church in the

West faces. To many people faith is no longer a possibility.

There is, none the less, the immersed life, another way of living in the world. *“Do you baptise goldfish?”* Christians are those who live the immersed life, like the little fish in that great tapestry. Here, life is a Gift of God, not a curse. The anthem here is *“This is the day that the Lord has made; we will rejoice and be glad in it”* (and not *“Always look on the bright side of life”*.) Central to this world is not the Void, but a Father’s love; a love which numbers the hairs of our head and which notes the fall of a sparrow. Here, there is a destination and a hope. *“I am the Resurrection and the Life..”* *“Today you will be with me in Paradise..”* Here there is rest on life’s journey, *“Come to me, all you who labour and are heavy laden and I will give you rest”*.

We live in this world of faith by remembering, reciting, meditating on and making our own the words and works of Christ. We meet together to encourage one another on the Way. It is into THIS world that the Christian is immersed through baptism. There is a stark contrast between these two worlds. Surrounded, as we are, by a culture that regards faith as distinctly odd, we may at times, according to our temperament wonder who is right. But, the waters of baptism say to us. *Remember you are immersed in the love of God, held in that love, surrounded by that love just as the little fish is held by the water.* I suppose even fish, not noted for their memory forget at times that the water surrounds them. Sometimes we can forget that the love of God surrounds us. *“Do you baptise goldfish?”* We pray for grace to live the immersed life; the baptised life.