Isaiah 42: 1-9; Acts 10: 34-43; Matthew 3: 13-end

**May I speak in the name of God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen**

This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased.’ That sentence is, for me, one of the most powerful in the entire Bible. I quote it quite often at baptisms, because what could be more moving than the thought that God loves us that much – loves a small person who hasn’t even yet got to grips with who God is, that much?

There’s an echo – quite a loud one – in the Old Testament reading this morning of that very same thing: Here is my servant, whom I uphold, my chosen, in whom my soul delights; I have taken you by the hand and kept you…

And then Peter, in the reading from Acts says something remarkably resonant with those thoughts: I truly understand that God shows no partiality. God loves each one of us with the intensity of a parent to a child, plus plus.

I am almost tempted, as I have said before, simply to sit down at this point and let that thought sink in. That much love is almost too much to take in – especially when we are aware of how often we fail God.

But the temptation to keep going is too great… This love of God for us is, if not a right, then at least a given – it is not dependent on what we do or how we behave, but nevertheless it comes with a measure of responsibility. I go back to the readings here: Isaiah - I have given you as a covenant to the people, a light to the nations, to open the eyes that are blind, to bring out the prisoners from the dungeon, from the prison those who sit in darkness.

And then Paul: He commanded us to preach to the people and to testify that he is the one ordained by God. Going back to the baptism of Jesus itself, which is rightly and properly our focus this morning, Paul tells us that: God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and with power;

And through our baptism does likewise to us. So baptism is a sign of adoption as God’s child, by the anointing of the Holy Spirit, but it is also being given the power to change the world – to be a light to the nations, to preach to the people and bear witness to Christ, to be a force for social justice.

But, you may ask, why did Jesus even need to be baptised? Part of the point of baptism is cleansing from sin – small children have not yet had a chance to do so, but the theology is that we all, by dint of being human, will at some stage sin, because we carry the history of sin from the time of the Creation. Clearly this was not part of Jesus’ make-up, so was unnecessary. But if another part of the point is to be anointed with the power of the Holy Spirit – remember this marked the beginning of Jesus’ ministry - then this applies equally to all of us. The beginning of a lifelong ministry even for the youngest among us, as they take on what I have referred to in the past as full membership of the church.

Jean Vanier – founder of the l’Arche communities of disabled and able-bodied people living together – said that the creation of a community is brought about by three things: eating together, praying and worshipping together, and celebrating together (perhaps translated as having fun together). He added that community, as a concept, is bound also in how gentle we are with one another – which manifests itself in not always having to be right, or to be first, or to get credit for something. The message has to be quite simply: I am glad you are here; you are valuable. Important for disabled people to hear, when they spend so much of their lives being dependent on others and being passed round at the will of others. But volunteers also for l’Arche, Vanier says, come across a sense of their own value as they work in these communities – they realise that they have felt valueless previously; that we are so competitive in so many ways perhaps because we feel we have little value.

At the point of Jesus’ baptism, John the Baptist was, arguably, one of Jesus greatest rivals. He was an established teacher with far more followers than Jesus had at this stage. And yet Jesus came to him and asked to be baptised. There was no sense for Jesus that this was a humbling experience – that asking this established teacher to anoint him was demeaning in any way. Here, in Jesus, was someone who was completely free from the fear of being less important or less than best. It is counter-cultural in so many ways – not to be worried about the impression we make on other people because we are so secure in our state of being loved and valued is something that we are not used to, I fear.

Of our three working sons, one has just started a new job and another is just about to. The first hundred days, we are told, are crucial. We ask ourselves how we can best make an impact and show that we are worth being employed, worth the trust invested in us. Yet here is Jesus, in the first less-than-hundred days of his ministry. He gets John to baptise him and then pushes off into the wilderness for forty days. Is he worried about the impact that will have on his followers and potential followers? It seems not.

Jesus going into the wilderness is part of working out who he is. I have a friend whose Spiritual Director told him to go away and hear God say those words to him. You are my son, my beloved. And that was for him a transformative experience. We can say we know that God loves us without ever understanding the depth of it. We will actually go on through eternity and still not plumb the depths of it. But we need to persevere. It is life-changing to know that God – that anyone – loves us with complete and unequivocal love.

Just a footnote before I finish: today is not only the celebration of the Baptism of Christ; it is also celebrated in many churches as Plough Sunday. In medieval times the communal village plough was often stored in the parish church over the winter months. Once the Christmas festivities were over, the hard task of preparing the frozen ground for spring sowing was the crucial first step towards a fruitful harvest. Before beginning their work, and recognising its importance for their whole community, workers would gather for a special blessing of the plough and the men who would be using it. The plough was then taken out of the church and paraded ceremoniously through the village to mark the beginning of the agricultural year. To show their appreciation and support, the whole community would take part in a big celebration with food, drink, and much festivity including dancing. Back to Jean Vanier’s exhortation to eat, worship and have fun together.

If early January is a time for new beginnings, let this time be for us too a time to focus on this baptism of Christ: to affirm our vocation as Christians to carry out the work to which we are called: binding up the broken-hearted, shining light into the darkness, bringing the gospel to others, and justice to those who have no voice – but also to reminding ourselves that God loves us. Just as we are.

**Amen**