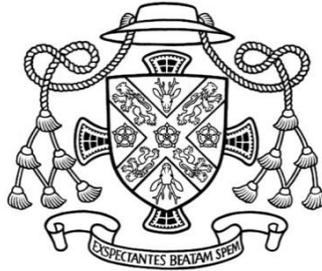


Pastoral Letter
Of
Terence Patrick Drainey



Bishop of Middlesbrough

Feast of the Baptism of the Lord 2022

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

“Go on, treat yourself. You deserve it!” This strap line seems to be repeated over and over again in lots of adverts in the media. Even if these exact words are not employed, at least they are implied. We live in a world where the “culture of entitlement” is strongly favoured and lived out at every level of society and by every age-group. *“Its my right, I’m owed it”* are not infrequent mantras. Yet at the same time, there is another influential school of thought which tells us that we only possess what we earn. So, we have to earn respect, it isn’t naturally given to us. We have to demand our rights we don’t possess them as our birth right. Even the inalienable right to life is being questioned widely in our society today. Value is decided by how much something costs, rather than its intrinsic significance. These attitudes are in the air we breathe, and it is hard to avoid them. Despite ourselves, we find that our judgements are tainted by them.

.....while Jesus after his own baptism was at prayer, heaven opened and the Holy Spirit descended on him in bodily shape, like a dove. And a voice came from heaven, ‘You are my Son, the Beloved; my favour rests on you.’

Today is the feast of the Baptism of Lord. Over the last couple of weeks, we have spent some time around the scene of Jesus’ birth in the stable at Bethlehem. But it is almost as though the Church does not want us to dally there too long, lest we should sentimentalise the true meaning of the Incarnation and Christmas. And today, we witness, at the beginning of Christ’s public life, the affirmation of the Father and the presence of the Holy Spirit. In Christ, God is truly among us, his people. And we are his people, the sheep of his flock. As Isaiah says in our first reading:

*‘Here is your God.’
Here is the Lord coming with power,
He is like a shepherd feeding his flock,
gathering lambs in his arms,
holding them against his breast
and leading to their rest the mother ewes.*

As we look around our world, surely there has never been a time when it is so blindingly obvious what a mess we have made of creation, of our planet. And if we are going to go

down the line of what we deserve, what we are owed, to what we are entitled, then the answer will be far from praise or reward. And yet still our God does not abandon us. Just as at the first Christmas God sends his son among us, taking to himself our flesh, our life and the consequences of our actions in order to heal us and bring us salvation, so also he continues to do the same thing in our day. Why? Well, we heard the reason in our second reading.

....when the kindness and love of God our saviour for mankind were revealed, it was not because he was concerned with any righteous actions we might have done ourselves; it was for no reason except his own compassion that he saved us, by means of the cleansing water of rebirth and by renewing us with the Holy Spirit.

We believe that through baptism, we are made children of God, daughters and sons of the Father. When we were baptised, the Father looked deep into our very being and seeing the image of his son, Jesus, imprinted there, he said to each of us: *You are my daughter, my son, my beloved ones; my favour rests on you.*

Being children of God is not something we have earned, not something we are owed, not something to which we are entitled. It is pure gift, pure grace, freely given out of love and compassion. And again, St Paul reminds us in our second reading that in return all we are asked is to be *self-restrained and live good and religious lives here in this present world, while we are waiting in hope for the blessing which will come with the Appearing of the glory of our great God and saviour Christ Jesus.*

This the principal significance of Christmas, of the Incarnation, and today, on the feast of the Baptism of the Lord it is made so clear to us in the words of the Preface at mass.

*For in the waters of the Jordan
the Father revealed with signs and wonders a new Baptism,
so that through the voice that came down from heaven
we might come to believe in the Word dwelling among us,
and by the Spirit's descending in the likeness of a dove
we might know that Christ the Father's Servant
has been anointed with the oil of gladness
and sent to bring the good news to us the poor.*

May that same Spirit also teach us, despite our waywardness and selfishness, how to renew the face of our earth.

Yours in blessed hope,



Bishop of Middlesbrough

To be read and made available on the Weekend of 8/9 January 2022 in all churches and chapels of the Diocese – also to be found in video form on the Diocesan website and YouTube