

## The Baptism of Christ – 10<sup>th</sup> January 2021

Some of you have asked why, if the government permits us to meet and worship together, has Christ Church chosen to stop all real life, face to face worship and take all services online? Some are resigned, some anguished and some angry. I think it is important for our understanding of ourselves as a church and our mission to look at this decision – which was not forced on us by the government but made by council two days ago.

After the government's announcement of new restrictions nearly a week ago, the Anglican church centrally considered its response. On Tuesday, Bishop Ruth sent all ministers in Bath and Wells a letter in which she commended to us taking our worship online where possible. The Archdeacons concurred and asked church leaders and PCCs to confer to discern whether in our particular circumstances we should continue with live worship. And so in obedience to that request, council came together virtually for an extraordinary council meeting on Friday. It was a good meeting with respect and genuine listening on all sides.

Some argued that Christ Church's role and mission is to be a living, visibly open church, worshipping and offering the sacraments to all who wanted to come in, whatever the physical risk was. After all, the worst outcome would be infection and death, and our life and death is in God's hand anyway.

Some took an opposing view – that the best way to serve the local community would be to stop all live services. Christ Church is a gathered congregation, people travel in from miles around, and one thing that is clearly set out in the guidelines is that people shouldn't travel to church from outside their village or town or part of a city because of the risk of bringing infection with us. The only way to comply with that was to stop all live services so that no one would be tempted to travel in from a distance.

So there were two possible outcomes to our discussion, both good. Either we could choose, for reasons of loving concern for others to cease meeting communally, or we could choose out of love and awe of God, to continue our communal worship trusting God with the outcome. Either outcome – reached through genuine discernment with the help of the Holy Spirit – would be a good outcome. It seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us to close the church to live worship.

I am personally very sorry not to be able to share in the bread and wine together with you all. But I completely accept the decision we made. And I am deeply grateful that we may delight in the choir, hear the gospel read and rejoice in the Word of God. At the baptism of Christ, God is present with the crowd, with John the Baptist and uniquely with the Son as a Trinitarian presence. As the Son is baptised, the Father speaks the words "my beloved Son in whom I am well pleased" and the Holy Spirit is manifested as a dove.

Today's Old Testament reading from the very beginning of Genesis reminds us of the significance of that Trinitarian existence. In the ancient Jewish Creation myth, God is present as Creator, but is also present as the Word of God which speaks creation into existence: "Let there be light – and there was light." And the Spirit is present as the 'Wind,' or 'Breath,' or 'Spirit' – all the same Hebrew word – of God which sweeps over the face of the waters.

In times like this, when not only are the foundations of our church life shaken, but also our political and cultural structure seem threatened, it is appropriate to return to the eternal truths of creation and the nature of God. This week we have seen violence within the

symbolic centre of democracy of the United States and we have seen our own government insist there will be no lockdown and then proclaim a lockdown within the same 24 hours. It is timely for us to remember that God is the creator not just of our world, but of the entire universe, and that the church has lived through plagues greater than this one and trials of leadership more testing even than those of our own day.

In our worship, as you see me on the screen or as you read this sermon on the page, however you are able to join with us, God is present with all of us. The Holy Spirit prays in us and with us, the love of Christ demonstrated in his human baptism reassures us of the forgiveness of sins, and the Father, the creator is the one who does not let us go.