

## Address by Nigel Guthrie for the Baptism of Christ

In just under a month, on the 6<sup>th</sup> of February, her Majesty the Queen will celebrate the 70<sup>th</sup> anniversary of her accession to the throne. As you may well have gathered, the official celebrations will be at the beginning of June, and let's hope that by then Covid will allow us some celebratory parish and community events! But with my hat on as one of the Chaplains to Her Majesty I thought I should do some homework and found a little booklet which my mother must have bought before the 1953 coronation. I remember her telling me that her father had bought or rented a television for the first time so that the family could gather to watch the service together at home and she remembered the occasion well. The booklet reminded me that the central symbolic act of the coronation is not the placing of the crown on the sovereign's head but the anointing with holy oil. In fact it was only this part of the service that the Queen asked should not be televised, regarding it as the most solemn and sacred part of the ceremony.

As we know from the Old Testament kings were anointed with oil to show that they were chosen by God to be leaders of God's people. The titles 'Messiah' and 'Christ' both derive from words meaning 'the anointed one': 'Messiah' being from the Hebrew and 'Christ' from the Greek. So, words like 'Christening' and 'Christian' contain that reference to anointing which denotes being chosen and appointed by God.

As we heard in our Gospel the anointing of Jesus was not by oil but by water, and God's choice was emphasized by the appearance of a dove representing the Holy Spirit and a voice from heaven saying "You are my Son, the beloved; with you I am well pleased." This was the launch of Jesus' public ministry and it was a vocation which he saw through to the bitter end of the cross and beyond it to resurrection.

On this Feast of the Baptism of Christ it's good to reflect on our own baptism however long ago it was, and under whatever circumstances. Perhaps we were brought or Baptism by our parents or decided later in life for ourselves? But either way it is good to pause and give thanks for those who have encouraged us on our Christian journey and helped us to make good use of the faith which is God's gift to us. Faith is not always the easiest gift to receive and sometimes we may not feel that comfortable with it, especially when the Church lets us, or other people, down. But I believe that if we receive this gift of faith God will use us to serve and bless

others. When we do that, our faith will grow and we will fulfil the anointing we received at our Christening.

I was glad that the life and recent death of another long-lived leader, Archbishop Desmond Tutu, was so widely reported. He was certainly someone who made the most of his Christian calling. Indeed, he is surely one of the Christian leaders who in our lifetimes has made a notable historic mark for good on his nation.

I was privileged to meet him in about 1990 when he visited Coventry Cathedral. As some of you who also met him have mentioned, it was an unforgettable experience. I remember three things about his visit. Firstly, he told us that even as Archbishop of Cape Town he didn't have the right to vote in national elections. This brought home to me in a fresh way the depth of injustice represented by apartheid. Secondly at the end of the service it came time for the procession to move to the west end and he took the hand of the Bishop of Coventry and danced up the aisle with him to considerable applause and the delight of all present. But at the end of the service he took time to greet many people and I remember him saying to me 'Hello Father, how are you getting on'. I was a young curate dressed in my clerical collar in the congregation and I felt both honoured but also humbled that this man, who truly had become a father to his people, should address me so kindly. But as you may know it was the simple greeting given by his local priest Trevor Huddleston to Tutu's mother which made such a profound impression on the young Desmond.

It was after he stood down as Archbishop that Desmond Tutu chaired the Truth and Reconciliation Commission finally presenting a large report to President Mandela. Tutu recognised that without a truthful reckoning with the past and reconciliation between former enemies there could be no good future for South Africa, although he also saw the shortcomings of the commission. But it was this aspect of his work that struck me most as I was thinking about our theme today.

Which of us cannot be concerned and sometimes dismayed at the rise of extremism and the promotion of false and damaging ideas which are passed off as truth. The anniversary of the storming of the Capital has reminded us of the divisive leadership of Donald Trump and the power of Social Media in promoting half-truths and outright disinformation - as well as good knowledge and inspiration. There is a growing sense of division in society which is deeply harmful, and truth and reconciliation should be the top priorities not only for our politicians but for all of

us. In December we saw that 61% of those admitted to critical care in the NHS with confirmed Covid were unvaccinated. Now we don't believe in forced vaccination in this country but when we look at the staggering waiting lists for other conditions we can only lament those who have spread poor information and scare stories about the vaccines helping, in the opinion of many of us, to fill up our hospital beds unnecessarily.

Part of our calling and anointing as Christians is to seek out the truth in every area of life and to be ready to question what we are told. We have grown up with a stable and generally functioning democracy in this country and it is something that we should truly treasure and never take for granted. As we celebrate the Baptism of Christ today let us rejoice in our calling as Christian people, beloved of God and well pleasing in his sight, ready to serve but also ready to dig out the truth.