

**NORTH BALWYN UNITING CHURCH
SUNDAY 13 JANUARY,
BAPTISM OF OUR LORD**

Isaiah 43: 1-7,

Psalm 29,

Luke 3: 15-17, 21-22

<http://player.vimeo.com/video/56715946>

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“Through Fire and Flood”

Isaiah 43 talks to us about the promise of God’s presence.

They are words that were written down at a time when God’s people were in exile with images of death and devastation still fresh in their collective memory. They’d lost everything and had been forced to move far from their familiar surroundings and circumstances to another country, into another culture, conquered and crushed, to be governed by an alien King and at the mercy of a foreign people.

A people suffering from Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder. People with no hope of a return to “normal” in the foreseeable future who had been through fire and flood in this passage are given words of comfort and hope by the prophet:

“When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and through the rivers, they will not overwhelm you; when you walk through fire you shall not be burned, and the flame shall not consume you”

In Psalm 29 we are given a similar message, as we do in many other parts of scripture, where we hear God’s voice over the tumult of life, raging floods and out of control fires, speaking with reassurance and promise.

We should hear these kinds of words and this type of imagery in the background when we listen to the gospel reading for today. When Jesus descends into the waters of the Jordan and the Spirit appears in voice and flame we are not talking about a gentle sprinkling of water, or one of the make-believe harmless flames now on sale in candle shops. No, we would do better to think of what we have seen in the papers and on television this week. Raging flames, high winds and consuming water-bombing.

What Isaiah says, what Psalm 29 suggests, what we need to imagine when we hear the gospel is that in the middle of trauma, deep trouble and burning despair, God’s voice is heard saying: “You are my beloved, you are mine” whatever happens.

Icons tell that story in their own, special way. The two dimensional, inverted perspective focusses the attention of the viewer and pushes what is most important to the front. In the case of the Icon of the baptism of Jesus, it is Jesus, up to his neck in water, that is clearly central. He is looking straight at us, catching our eyes, while the other figures in the picture are all focussing on him rather than on us or each other, inviting us to join their adoration of the central figure.

The way it is painted, it is not hard to imagine the river connected to hell, as the ancients imagined it was. It often has a shape that echoes the shape of a tomb, a deep chasm to the bowels of the earth, or, with a bit of imagination, a font with steps leading up to heaven. At the bottom sea monsters are seen to be fleeing, representing all that is

frightening about the sea and reminds us of stories where water fled to make room for dry land like the exodus. With the words from Psalm 114:3,
“the sea saw and fled, the Jordan turned back”.

Jesus has his arms crossed, or there is a cross in the halo over his head reminding us of how he nearly drowned in the suffering of death on a cross. In other Icons we see his hand lifted in blessing, indicating he cleans the waters, and blesses them for baptism. It is not the other way around – the waters cleaning him who is not in need of any cleaning. Kneeling in adoration we see John the Baptist, baptising Jesus while showing reverence to one whom he deems more important than himself.

On the side there is the tree of life, or sometimes even a garden reminding the viewer of the garden of Eden and the new Creation that is about to emerge with Jesus. Or we see a tree with an axe laid at the root close to John, recalling John’s own preaching to those who came to him: *“And now also the axe is laid to the root of the trees: therefore every tree which brings not forth good fruit is hewn down, and cast into the fire.”* (Matt 3:10). On the other side, Angels are seen, ready to receive the risen Christ (risen out of the waters of hell and death) with cloths in the colours of heaven and earth. Jesus is naked, as human as we are and nearly as wide as the river itself, as if it is he who is cutting a chasm through the wilderness and not the water.

In Jesus we find ourselves reflected in our nakedness, our vulnerability. Human like him we will sometimes find ourselves hell-bound and in deep water, filled with threats and monsters ready to devour us, and we realise we are in need of a new creation, of a thorough cleansing of our minds and souls, in need of new beginnings, in need of the Spirit to descend on us and ignite in us a new flame, light a new fire, fill us with new life and inspiration. Are we in need of knowing that even where we may find ourselves swimming in what may feel like the waters of death and threatened by the fires of hell, God is reaching out to us, with the monsters that frighten us fleeing already and under God’s control.

The passages we read this morning tell us is that there is a voice calling over the tumult of life saying “you are my beloved”, helping us to rise from whatever may threaten to overwhelm us, and take our hand, help us ashore, to wrap us in the grace of his presence on heaven and on earth. Amen.

Image: Baptism of Christ, from **Art in the Christian Tradition**, a project of the Vanderbilt Divinity Library, Nashville, TN. <http://diglib.library.vanderbilt.edu/act-imagelink.pl?RC=47779> [retrieved January 9, 2013].