

Baptism of Christ 2020 – the Power of God’s Healing Love

Sermon preached by the Reverend Canon Philip Banks

Isaiah 42.1-9, Acts 10.34-43, Matthew 3.13-end

You are my child, the beloved: with you I am well pleased.

Don’t be deceived by the title of the film *Jojo Rabbit*¹, currently on release, into thinking that it is a children’s movie. I actually think that all children over 12 should definitely see it (it’s a 12 rating) – but I found it a deeply moving and pretty confronting movie set in Germany towards the end of WW2: if you’ve seen it you’ll know that it unfolds from the perspective of a sparky, quirky ten year-old anti-hero who has been sucked into the Hitler Youth, and a Jewish teenager who has been hidden by a German family in their attic. And the film’s Maori-Jewish director Taika Waititi has a great comic role playing an almost John Cleese-like Hitler – which makes it genuinely laugh-out-loud funny but with many moments when it is hard to hold back the tears. Hard to hold back tears because it is also a film about the banality of evil, about how easily fascist lies can corrupt a nation and its children – but above all about deep themes of how real, passionate, sacrificial ‘love confronting evil’ somehow ushers in justice, love, compassion and healing, and how the power of friendship can open up people’s minds to truth and bring healing.

Why am I telling you all that? For two reasons – one is to do with our personal calling to be people who bring healing to those around us; and the other to do with a change we’re making to the 10 o’clock service, for a trial period from next month, which is to do with our own need for God’s healing and strengthening touch in our lives.

First, our own personal calling as people of faith: so, in today’s readings that ‘Essex Gospel’ has come around again in the church’s lectionary: ‘*You are my child, the beloved: with you I’m well pleased*’: the world-wide church remembers today the Baptism of Jesus. It helps us remember the promises of our own baptism. Our baptism joins us to Jesus in that continuity of the gospel proclamation of justice and love, compassion and healing. Those words ‘*You are my child, the*

beloved: with you I am well pleased’ are addressed to you and me. That should make us think: think about the kind of people we are: whether I really do seek the grace of God to be present in my life. It should make me do some inner soul-searching which acknowledges, and works to eliminate, the latent racism or xenophobia or ego that’s within me, that stems from fear and selfishness – and all the other shortcomings, which we can all name, which somehow make us less than the Godly people we could be, the people we are baptized to be. *You are my child, the beloved: with you I am well pleased*’. How much will I sacrifice my popularity, security, well-being – to ‘do the right thing not the easy thing’ – to speak truth to power for the values of justice which bring the compassion and healing portrayed in the film.

So that’s the first thing – our personal calling to be people who bring the Gospel-imperative of healing love to those around us.

Then the second thing is about our own personal and individual need for God’s healing touch. Archbishop Rowan Williams before he retired said this: “*One of the least-known features of the life of the Anglican Church has been the revival of the Ministry of Healing as a routine part of the life of thousands of congregations*”.²

So the change we’ll be trialling on Sundays here is, that from next month, we will all have the opportunity for private, individual prayer – either for yourself or for someone else – with one of the Cathedral’s ministry team: that will be available quietly and discreetly at the Lady Chapel altar, during the distribution of Communion. Today and for the next couple of weeks sermons will touch on this.

What happens at the Lady Chapel altar, if you choose to go there after you’ve received Communion, will be entirely up to you:

maybe you’d like to receive the laying on of hands and anointing with oil for healing;

maybe you want to pray into a particular problem that you’re facing or for someone else, where you pray God’s healing touch, perhaps for someone who has lost their job, or have family problems, or illness.

There's good reason for doing this during Communion, and in the Lady Chapel where the blessed sacrament is reserved: for the Eucharist is the ultimate expression of God's peace-giving, life-giving, healing touch in our lives: the Eucharist makes present the love, and life, and light and healing of the Holy One of God: Christ in our midst. Jesus is the one who brings 'healing in his wings' – the healing and peace for which we all long.

It's important to say that this offer of the ministry of healing is a Gospel-imperative: there's no doubt in the New Testament that healing – in its widest sense – is central to Jesus' ministry – and to the ministry of the earliest Christians. And – I'm telling you what you know already – that this isn't just about physical healing (although there are plenty of accounts of that in the New Testament), but it is also about bringing those who were isolated, lonely, bereaved, ostracized – strength and joy and peace to go on.

So it is not just about praying that the deep pain or ache, physical or spiritual, that's within me will go away: rather healing can also be the deep peace and inner strength that Jesus gives me to accept and work with the situation I'm in without bitterness or resentment.

It's important also to say something about confidentiality – I hope it's stating the obvious to say that whatever you choose to say or not say at the Lady Chapel altar will be treated absolutely as in the 'seal of the confessional'. But there's also a responsibility of confidentiality on you and each one of us too – actually kind-of 'not to notice' who it is that's going to the Lady Chapel for private prayer or anointing: for if I'm going there for private prayer I'm unlikely to want six people to come up to me afterwards and say "have you got a problem"?! Nor am I likely to feel affirmed if I see you nudging each other and saying "ooh I wonder what's up with him?" Forgive me if I'm 'teaching my grandmother'.

Do think and pray about this ministry – an extension of what already happens once a month on a Tuesday lunchtime here. If you have questions, do of course talk to any of us. For this is but one extra dimension to the whole tapestry of our belonging together as a

Christian family, all intertwined and giving expression to our prayer and concern for one another and the world and its peoples.

And always holding before us the Cross of Jesus – for all wholeness and healing comes not from us frail humans – however good or bad a channel of God's grace we might be - but rather healing comes from Jesus who is our light and life and salvation.

Like the protagonists in the film *Jojo Rabbit*, who through growing friendship and real sacrifice bring compassion and healing to each other, may we think about our baptismal calling to be people who bring healing to those around us; and may we too receive God's healing and strengthening touch in our lives.

And may we always know, deep within our hearts, that God's words in today's gospel are spoken in love to each of us and to every human being, that *You are my child, the beloved: with you I am well pleased.*

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¹*Jojo Rabbit* 12A, Twentieth Century Fox 2019, 108 mins [photo below]

²Rowan Williams Easter Message 2012.

