

SERMON FOR THE BAPTISM OF CHRIST | 12.01.20

Isaiah 42: 1-9; Acts 10: 32-43; St Matthew 3: 13-17

So we have a new term after Brexit: Megxit! I am not sure who coined it first but a rough definition derives from the recent decision of the Duke and Duchess of Sussex, Harry and Megan, to withdraw from front line duties as senior royals. It has been the news of the week and has been the subject of some terse statements from Buckingham Palace – and rather more ribald jokes from the likes of Graham Norton.

But what has all that got to do with us? Well, it helpfully focuses our attention on this question: can you get out of something you are born into? We all know the system: the British Royal Family, (nicknamed by themselves as ‘the firm’) is probably the most exclusive body there ever was. Being born into it has, at least up until recently, brought huge privileges and honours – and along with it the responsibility of not bringing the Family into disrepute. And so we can see, through that royal line, who the King or Queen is likely to be for several generations, starting with our own Queen Elizabeth and going through Prince Charles and Prince William through to Prince George who is still only 6.

And even if someone is said to have failed to live up to that responsibility - whether Edward VIII or Prince Andrew – are they still not fully fledged ‘royals’? Whether they like it or not, tradition dictates that they can’t just ‘leave’.

Like you, I have no idea what settlement will be worked out behind closed doors for the Sussex’s; I suspect there will be a mix of the new – letting them have more freedom than anyone else has enjoyed - while still expecting them to honour the family links and at least some of its traditions. It is going to be some balancing act.

But it is exactly the same as for you and me as the result of our Baptism. Once we go through the waters of baptism – wherever that takes place - we are in; we are part of the family; we are indelibly and permanently part of God’s DNA pool. It can’t be undone or wiped out. While it doesn’t leave a physical mark like circumcision for Jewish boys, it is just as real in God’s eyes as the action of the mohel and his scalpel.

But you say, millions of children are baptised - and are never seen or heard of again. For some reason we seem to have turned baptism in the western Church into a rather elaborate naming ceremony. Afterwards people can do what they like – and most do.

You will have come across stories, as I have in recent years – especially in Ireland – of what happened when children have been taken away from their unmarried mothers. There was another interview on the radio just this week, of how a mother was separated from her new born daughter just days after her delivery – and how that young mother had spent her whole life trying to find her child. It was only amazing good luck and a lot of research that the two of them had been reunited - almost fifty years later.

Interestingly what both mother and daughter said, quite independently, was how they both knew how real their mother/daughter bond was, despite their never having spent any time together. When they were finally reunited, tears in their eyes, it was the restoration of a relationship that had been tested to the uttermost – but which had always been there.

And this also is the story of the people of God – from the time Adam and Eve were kicked out of the Garden of Eden, through endless wars, exiles and religious revivals, through slavery in Egypt and the occupation by first the Greeks and then the Romans. Whatever stupid things the people of Israel did, however fed up God was with them and however many times they were given final warnings, God could not and would not finally let them go. God could not abandon his own children however much they pleaded to be given their independence. Jesus' story of the Prodigal Son who wastes all his dad's money is just one insight into the mind of the God who cannot and will not let us go.

So when Jesus turns up at the pool where John the Baptist is baptizing all those who came to him for forgiveness, poor John is mystified. Why would his cousin Jesus – completely sinless and without fault – come to him for this ceremonial washing? It didn't make sense.

And Jesus has to spell it out. Yes, one part of baptism symbolism is the calling on God to forgive sin. The graphic on the Weekly News sums that up: it is our chance to wash and be clean.

But there is the other dimension which is every bit as important – indeed it may be more so because it is what Jesus was being baptised for. As St Matthew records Jesus saying in a rather cryptic phrase in today’s Gospel: *Let it be so now, for it is proper for us in this way – to fulfill all righteousness.*

Whatever does that mean? Simply this: Jesus knew that if he was to live and die for us, he had to be fully identified with us too. He needed to be seen to be part of the family, standing shoulder to shoulder with other members of ‘the firm’. And he was right. No sooner had he come up out of the water than a voice from heaven, the voice of his Father no less, cries out: *This is my Son, my Beloved.* Under God, baptism had shown Jesus to be fully part of the God’s people, God’s family. Indelibly.

And that is what we have, as baptised members of the Church, and it is what we need: that sense of belonging. Indeed better theologians than me have talked about how belonging often comes before believing. We can only find our way to God in communion with each other. We might well want to go out on a limb at times but, ultimately, we need each other: blood is, after all, thicker than water.

Wise advisers around the Queen know all this of course and are desperately trying to find a mechanism that will allow Harry and Megan the space to be themselves out of the public eye. But they will also be insisting that the Sussex’s do not pretend that they can have their cake and eat it: they can never be entirely free to do whatever they want. Nor will it, ultimately, make them happy.

Jesus’ example shows us that each of us has our own vocation and we will all want to walk our own paths at times. But to be successful we also have to learn where the balance lies, making sure we don’t burn our boats behind us.

This week an adult approached me asking for baptism. It wasn’t for the first time. And when I gently suggested that he needed to accept that this meant relating to the rest of Jesus’ family in the Church, he told me I was useless at my job!

What Jesus’ baptism gives us is a picture of what each of our lives is about: the balancing of our own calling, hopes and aspirations - while still being part of the family of God. A hard but necessary truth.