



Sermon preached by Revd Nigel Uden on 19th September 2021

Readings: Ezekiel 36.24-27; I Peter 3.13-22; John 1.19-34

Believer's Baptism

I Peter 3.15 ‘...in your hearts sanctify Christ as Lord’

This text suggests that Peter understands what life's like. On the one hand, life has so much to cherish and enjoy. I imagine, we'd each make a different list of things we cherish and enjoy, but mine would include Mendelssohn, the Cheviots, those Bible commentaries that make sermon prep so much easier ... and, utterly essentially, ice cream. Just pause for a moment in the stillness and rejoice in the first four things that come to your mind, which you cherish and enjoy. *Pause*

And alongside those cheering things, maybe on the other hand there are others that rob life of its joy for you? Again, our lists might be rather varied, but I'll own up to fearing the loss of manual dexterity, both for handwriting and for keyboard playing, to fearing depression, because I have seen it ravage too many people I know, to fearing heights ... and to fearing a world shortage of ice cream. What might be on your list of fears? *Pause*

In First Peter chapter 3, it's persecution and persecutors that are feared. For fear here, Peter uses the same word from which we get 'phobia': you know, those things that make us anxious, scared, even petrified into rock-like inactivity. Maybe we didn't have that sort of thing on our list of things we fear? If we were in Afghanistan, though, we might as we face prejudice or persecution, not least if we are female? And if we lived on a deprived British sink estate, we might be deeply fearful, too: gangs, dealers, loan sharks, and the like. But thinking about it, there *could* be things that relentlessly frighten you and me, too. Even if we do our best to forget about them, they are not always far from our minds. I know of an elder in one of the churches I visited a few years ago, who quietly gets on with life, but against the backdrop of deep-seated fear of the day a convict will be released from jail having received a long sentence following evidence the elder gave at his trial. Fear is little to do with whether it is rational; the fact is, fear is real for us if we are frightened. Moreover, fear, whether of evil or something more mundane, is far from unusual.

But Peter offers an alternative, suggesting that our fear can be ameliorated by 'sanctifying Christ as Lord'. The word 'sanctify' there can also be translated as 'revere', having roots akin to the phrase in the Lord's Prayer where we speak of the Lord's name being 'hallowed'. Revering Christ as Lord is not about us being holier than thou, nor about being superhuman. Less still is it to do with a patronising belittling of our fear, as if we should get over it. No, it's much more significant than that. It's about giving higher place, greater emphasis, more credibility to the God than to evil – to the God who, in Jesus, is defined by grace, truth, and compassion. The one, you see, deals in death, the other in life, life abundant.

And when, as a believer, we come to be baptised, one of the things we're doing is overtly, demonstrably to put our trust in that God. We're not saying the frightening stuff isn't real, but that the waters of baptism dilute the power of what frightens us – our sin, our old life, the prospect of death. At the foot of the cross, where William will shortly stand, and upon which 'love so amazing, so divine' is given its ultimate expression, everything else is put into perspective. As St Paul put it in Romans 8: 'Who will separate us from the love of Christ? Will hardship, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? ...No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. ³⁸For I am convinced that nothing in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.'

So, as William is baptised, let's recall our own, and rejoice that because of Jesus – his living and dying and rising - 'sin and death and hell shall never o'er us final triumph gain'. And if that's not a profession of faith we've ever made, but would like to, maybe William is encouraging us to do so. '...in your hearts sanctify Christ as Lord'. Amen

N. P. Uden

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