

## THE VOICE OF GOD ON THE WATERS

*Isaiah 43:1–7; Psalm 29; Acts 8:14–17; Luke 3:15–22*

Now when all the people were baptized, and when Jesus also had been baptized and was praying, the heaven was opened, and the Holy Spirit descended upon him in bodily form like a dove. And a voice came from heaven, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased" (Luke 3:21–22).

The voice of the Lord is upon the waters:  
the God of glory thunders,  
the Lord upon the great waters (Psalm 29:3).

What kind of God are we dealing with here?

Over Christmas we catch up with family and friends, and in conversation we can often pick up on where they are with regard to matters of faith, and what their view of God may be. A couple of years ago someone who I know is a regular church attender and had been in church for Christmas mentioned in passing 'God—whoever or whatever that may be', implying that we can all have our ideas about what we call 'G-O-D', but we can never really know, and it's probably better not to. Another relative, who keeps a conscious arm's length from Christian faith, especially when the family gathers, made a point of telling me he was reading a book by Philip Adams, who would probably come to very different conclusions from mine. Philip Adams one of those God-obsessed atheists who say they don't believe in God, but can't leave Him alone. I enjoy reading Philip Adams' column—he is an entertaining writer.

I grew up in a religious family where God was almost part of the furniture, and that is not unusual—that has been true of ‘most people throughout most of human history’. Sixty-eight percent of Australians still believe in a God or Universal Spirit. Olivera Petrovich, an expert in the psychology of religion at Oxford University in the UK did comparative research in Britain and Japan, and in 2008 published ‘empirical evidence that infants naturally incline toward belief in some kind of Creator’.<sup>1</sup> But you do come across alternative views. One of the first for me was when I was at school reading a biography of the early twentieth century playwright George Bernard Shaw, who said: Oh yes, I believe that the little nation of Israel in the old days had a tribal god called Yahweh, but I have no personal faith in a God these days. More recently faith in God has come under virulent attack. Atheist writers such as Richard Dawkins and Christopher Hitchens are on the bestseller lists worldwide. Sometimes we are almost bullied into thinking that you have to be mentally deranged to believe in what someone on Q&A referred to as that celestial ‘monster’.

So we can't help these days having that question hanging over us, as to whether God exists or not, and naturally that instils doubts or wonderings in our minds. One thing I have found helpful is to realise that if God is God, then He does not depend for His existence on whether I or anyone else believes in him or not, and if I, in my exalted wisdom, decide that God does not exist, that would not take the question away—we would still be faced with it.

---

<sup>1</sup> John Dickson, *Life of Jesus: Who He Is and Why He Matters*, Zondervan, Grand Rapids Michigan, 2010, pp. 17–19.

Of course when we recall times when we have known the calling of God, the demands of God, the help of God, the love of God, in our lives, then the whole question becomes rather academic.

I like what is said in Psalm 94:

He who planted the ear, does he not hear:  
he who formed the eye, does he not see?  
... has the teacher of the world no knowledge? (Psalm 94:9,  
10)

In other words, whoever or whatever caused the formation of the human brain must be at least as brainy as we are, if not more so. The Creator of human persons must be at least as personal as we are. Because we didn't make ourselves.

We are in the season of Epiphany—the manifestation of God to the nations, to the all ethnic groupings of the earth—so it is appropriate to think about: what kind of God is manifested here? And this account of the baptism of Jesus takes us even further than simply that God exists and is likely to be personal:

a voice came from heaven, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased" (Luke 3:22).

As Psalm 29 says:

The voice of the Lord is upon the waters (Psalm 29:3).

This God *speaks* to us, this God reveals to us what He is like, so we can't say any more that we don't know what kind of God He is.

What do we hear when He speaks? On this occasion, when God speaks to the human person called Jesus? God says:

You are my Son, the Beloved (Luke 3:22).

That's very relational, isn't it? There is a Father there, and there is a Son—there is a Parent and there is a Child—and there is love. There is a relational oneness there, that goes right back into the God-ness of God. Is that not a wonderful revelation?

But it's not all just close and lovey-dovey. As Psalm 29 says:

The voice of the Lord is upon the waters:  
the God of glory thunders (Psalm 29:3).

John the Baptist had been doing a bit of thundering, hadn't he?

the crooked shall be made straight,  
and the rough ways made smooth (Luke 3:5).

There is a strong and pure righteousness about the way God is, and about the way God loves, that lays an expectation on those whom God has made in His image and likeness that will not settle for anything less than all of that loving rightness. 'The axe is lying at the root of the trees', John says:

every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down  
and thrown into the fire (Luke 3:9).

And there is a practical outworking of that righteousness of God that is to come out in daily human living. 'Whoever has

two coats' John said, 'must share with anyone who has none, and whoever has food must do likewise'. Those in business should collect no more than the amount prescribed. Those with power should not use it to extort money from others by threat, or accuse others falsely, or be greedy for more than is due to them. That's the loving righteousness of God coming out in practice in human daily lives. Of those made in His image, God expects nothing less. Those of us who have known the love of God in our lives will also be aware that high demand and calling. No doubt painfully aware—because with that awareness of our high calling comes knowing how far we have fallen short. As we say near the start of each service:

we have not loved you with our whole heart;  
we have not loved our neighbours as ourselves (APBA p. 120).

But the remarkable thing is that God is saying to this particular human person:

You are my Son, the Beloved; *with you I am well pleased* (Luke 3:22).

One year for my reading through the Bible used Eugene Petersen's *The Message*. In that translation of Matthew's account of the baptism of Jesus God says:

This is my Son, chosen and marked by my love, delight of my life (Matthew 3:17).

This the God who delights in the human creatures that He has made (compare Proverbs 8:31), and delights particularly in this human person Jesus, who is God's own image and likeness, as we are all meant to be (see Colossians 1:15; Genesis 1:26, 28; 5:1–3). As Jesus said to

John the baptiser in Matthew's account, he is the one who has come 'to fulfil all righteousness'—to fill out in a human life and action all the righteousness of God.

What clues does Luke give us in this passage as to how Jesus will go about doing this—filling out all God's righteousness? Listen to how Luke mentions the baptism of Jesus almost in passing:

Now when all the people were baptized, and when Jesus also had been baptized and was praying, the heaven was opened . . . (Luke 3:21).

What is the focus there? All the people were being baptised. Oh, yes, and Jesus also had got baptised, and then this happened. As if Jesus had just mingled himself with the crowd, got himself on the end of the queue, with the rest of the people going down into the water. What were all the people doing, coming to be baptised by John? This was 'a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins' (Luke 3:3). John was letting everyone know that God was about to take action to rescue people from all their lack of righteousness and lack of love, and they needed to get ready by washing their old life away and turning back to God. And here was Jesus, with the rest of them, going down to join them. Identifying himself with them in their sinful condition.

In Matthew's account, John tries to stop him—What are *you* doing here? You don't need this—'I need to be baptised by you' (Matthew 3:14). John recognised in Jesus the one with whom God was already well pleased, one without sin (1 Peter 2:22; 1 John 3:4), one who needed no repentance. But Jesus said to John, 'it is proper for us in this way to fulfill all

righteousness' (Matthew 3:15)—this is the way God's righteous saving action of love is going to be carried through—by me identifying in this action with all these sinners.

Jesus did this supremely, of course, on the cross. Identifying himself totally with us in our benighted sinful condition, taking that guilt, that pain, that shame, that defilement, that grossness, that violence, that debasement, into himself, to take away the sin of the world. It's as if he was to become that unfruitful tree that needed to be cut down and thrown into the fire. So we could be free of that needing to happen to us. That is what he was committing himself to in the action of being baptised along with the rest of the people. Not holding himself back separate from them, but making himself a part of them—one with them, just as he was one with his Father. Even to the death. That's the loving saving righteousness of God.

Of all the things that Jesus did, I think it is this identification of himself with me that moves me most deeply. That he would go to the trouble of putting himself in my place, with everything that is going on inside me, and that has gone on inside me and that will go on inside me—taking that burden into himself, to free me from it. When the one who is doing this is no one less than the glorious Creator of the universe—that blows me away. But there's more. Not only does he identify himself with me, in my sinful flesh, but he also takes action to identify me with himself. By his more-than-human love he draws us all into himself on that cross, so that what happens to him in his death and resurrection somehow happens to us all (see John 12:32–33; Ephesians 2:4–10), so that he not only takes away our sin but also, in

making us one with him, he imparts to us his righteousness: as Paul the apostle said, 'For our sake [God] made [Christ] to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become'—what?—'we might become the righteousness of God' (2 Corinthians 5:21). That we might hear the heavenly Father say to us, even now, what He says to His Son: 'You are my child, the one I love, with you I am well-pleased'. The voice of God, thundering across the waters. I say 'even now' because even now we belong to Christ—he has claimed us, we are now part of his crucified and risen body—and before God his righteousness is ours. Even as we are still trying to get used to that reality, and trying to catch up with it. So that now freed from the trammels of all our sins—past, present and future—we are thoroughly well set up to do those actions of practical righteousness in our daily lives. With a view to the age to come when that's all that there will be in the new heavens and new earth—no evil, only the strong, pure, loving righteousness of God (see 2 Peter 3:13).

That's what our baptism is all about—it is us being identified with Christ, the one who in love has identified himself with us—being made one with him. The same Spirit that came on Jesus 'in bodily form like a dove', coming on us to make all of this a reality. In the Anglican Church, as in other churches, we have a special way of trying to make sure that the coming of the Spirit has happened to all of us. We call it Confirmation—it's prayer with the laying-on of hands, for strengthening by the Spirit of God, like what Peter and John did with the believers in Samaria in Acts 8—and because it's so important we get the Bishop in to do it for us. So we can know for sure we belong to God as God's beloved sons and daughters, for ever.

And isn't all of this what God prophesied through Isaiah  
700 years before Christ?

Do not fear, for I have redeemed you;  
I have called you by name, you are mine.  
When you pass through the waters, I will be with you;  
and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you;  
when you walk through fire you shall not be burned,  
and the flame shall not consume you.  
For I am the Lord your God,  
the Holy One of Israel, your Savior . . .  
Because you are precious in my sight,  
and honored, and I love you . . .  
Do not fear, for I am with you . . .  
bring my sons from far away  
and my daughters from the end of the earth—  
everyone who is called by my name,  
whom I created for my glory,  
whom I formed and made (Isaiah 43:1-3, 4, 5, 6-7).

That's why we're here now. And I just want to let you  
know: I think we are in very good hands.