

HOME

A BENALLA BAPTISM

*A version of the little homily by Canon Andrew Neaum
on baptizing his granddaughter in Holy Trinity Benalla.*

The Church, to many of those outside of it appears to be old fashioned, out of fashion, fuddy duddy, deadly dull, dreary, wowserish, hypocritical, goody-goody and kill-joy.

Zany normality

It isn't though, is it? I wouldn't be a churchman or priest if it was. I have had more fun, joy, excitement and delight in the church, because of the church, from the church, than from anywhere else, in a marvellous life. A life notable for variety, sparkle, interest, stimulation and fascination.

The Church, the sweet, sweet Church, has taken me all over the world, introduced me to more interesting, loving, crazy, saintly, dilly-daft, intelligent, kindly human beings than most people ever dream of meeting. They still knock on my door and ring my phone day in day out, a rag tag and bobtail mob of fascinating humanity, second to none in their variety and zany normality.

The very, very best thing about the Church, though, is its idealism, the heights to which it aspires, what it reaches out for. It puts love, sacrificing, extravagant, forgiving love, at the very centre of human existence.

The ultimate question

The cross, which we see on our church and in our churches. The cross that we hang around our necks, place upon our walls and mantelpieces, with which we doodle, dandle and decorate pretty well everything and with which, if we are into self-mutilation, we even tattoo upon our persons, is the symbol of just this sort of love.

Love, Christianity maintains is the answer to the ultimate of all ultimate questions. "Why do we exist?" The answer: "to learn to love".

We exist in order to learn to love sacrificially, to die to self and selfishness to lose ourselves and so to find ourselves in loving others.

Love, though, being a social virtue, is found, known, nurtured, deepened only in communion, in fellowship, in loving and forgiving community. If little Henrietta, to be baptized today, is ever to find her reason for being, is ever to learn why she exists and make any sense out of her life, she will need to be immersed in and surrounded by this sort of sacrificing love, this Christlike love.

Not mere kith and kin

Such love is not, of course, found only in the Church. She will find it, hopefully, perhaps even mostly, in her family and in her family's friends. The Christian vision of love however, widens, broadens and deepens the natural human family to include the down and out, strangers, orphans, widows, refugees, rat bags sinners, enemies. It spills out and over from being mere kith and kin stuff into love of a profounder sort: inclusive, all embracing, self-sacrificing, heavenly, of the very nature of God, life's *raison d'etre*, the reason we exist. Unless this wider vision of love is a part of Henrietta's life she will be denied a wellspring of such importance that she is likely to develop stunted, limited, compromised, into being far, far less than she ought to be.

All important

Baptism is not just a quaint custom, a pleasing take-it-or-leave-it ancient tradition. It is an all important event. It is a matter of salvation, of redemption from the grasping, materialistic, spiritless, pointless, aimless, slack-lipped, baseball-capped, broken, dope-headed, boozed up, feral, joylessness of a godless society.

It is entry into loving forgiving community, a community with a vertical as well as horizontal dimension. It is entry into the foundation society of our civilization. It is all important, is everything. The promises made at baptisms are best kept.

The Church is a fallible organisation. The ABC, the Age and media generally trumpet its iniquities and fallibilities with fiendish glee. We can only agree. The history of mother Church, both once upon a time and still today, is as inglorious as glorious. But for all that, to me, and to so many, many others, the Church has been everything. I love it, I love it, I love it. I have found in the Church my love of art, my love of literature, my love of music, my love of architecture. I have found England, Africa, St Helena, Tristan da Cunha, Australia, I have found in it the love of my parents and family, I have found in it my first loving wife, Margaret now departed this life, but still a member of the Church beyond death's river. I have found in it my second loving wife, Diana, I have found the kindest, most loving and accepting of all people, I have found sinners repentant and forgiven, I have found sinners, nasty swine some of them too, unrepentant and yet forgiven. I have found in it purpose, sense, belonging, acceptance, I have found forgiveness, mercy, joy, prayer, vision, the sublime. I have found my very self in the Church I have found the divine, I have found God. Dare I say it without sounding like a bible freak and nitwit, I have found Jesus and I love him and all he stands for.

With fizz and perzazz

So with what pleasure it is, that in this lovely Benalla Anglican Church, I participate in the baptism of Henrietta. With her Mum and Dad and two little sisters she will enrich this church community for years to come, and be enriched in turn. She turns a duo of little girls into a splendid trio, Christian girls, God-

sparkling, splendid girls, full of perzazz, spark and fizz, alive with the laughter, joy and love that made Jesus of Nazareth into love's celebrity, and who turned the world turtle, topsy turvy, upside down.

May the waters of Henrietta's baptism like soda water, like champagne, like gin and tonic, effervesce, bubble, lift her spirits and our spirits in the Spirit, to the Spirit of the living God.