

We live in tumultuous times. There is a pandemic: virus, variants, and vaccines. It seems that lockdown and restrictions may go on for some time. The toll on mental and physical health, the economy, and unemployment grows, almost imperceptibly. In our country politics is marked by division and ill-feeling, while this week the world was stunned by presidential provocation and the riotous scenes on Capitol Hill in Washington DC. Elsewhere in the world, Ghanaian soldiers entered their parliament to stop fighting - quell a brawl - between the two opposing parties. The North Korean leader, Kim Jong Un, proposes to increase his country's military capabilities. Alongside the suffering and distractions around the world, many of us will face our own burdens of love: the loss or ill-health of a loved one, the anxiety of broken relationships, or the fear that comes with the possible loss of earnings and the prospect of debt.

Conversely, many people remain comfortable throughout these difficult months and have benefited, surely, from the beauty of nature, healthy walks and a change of lifestyle. Birds, squirrels, and rabbits

foraging in gardens for seeds and nuts and the snowclad slopes of Arran are just some of creation's curative therapies. The poet, John Keats, said 'Beauty is truth', while his fellow Englishman William Wordsworth, seated on the Welsh bank of the River Wye, recalled:

I have felt  
A presence that disturbs me with the joy  
Of elevated thoughts; a sense sublime  
Of something far more deeply interfused,  
Whose dwelling is the light of setting suns,  
And the round ocean and the living air,  
And the blue sky.....

Whatever our story, whatever the trials we face, as individuals and as a community, we come to this sacred moment, this shared time of tranquillity, to avail ourselves again of the solace and healing that only God, the Eternal Mystery, can give.

In our lesson today we immerse ourselves with Jesus into the warm waters of the River Jordan. In the language of poetic mythology, what we may call 'mythography', we watch Jesus, initially a disciple of John, step down into the flowing river and be baptised by the hand of John, the desert ascetic and Judaic prophet. The very mention of the River Jordan would have evoked primal memories in the Jewish people of their ancestors, the Hebrew slaves departing the

confinement of Egypt and entering the freedom of the Promised Land. The waters of the Jordan symbolised renewal, new birth and new life.

Albeit ignoring warnings of virus spread and possible death, thousands of Orthodox worshippers in Bulgaria this week honoured their centuries-old Epiphany traditions. Young men plunged into the freezing waters of rivers and lakes across the country commemorating the baptism of Jesus. Like a starter's gun, priests tossed crucifixes into the waters and the race was on to retrieve them. The legend is that the one who retrieves the cross will be freed from evil spirits and remain healthy throughout the year.

In the past, if not this year, President Putin, bare-chested, stripped to his trunks and, wearing a cross round his neck, immersed himself in the icy waters of Lake Seliger, north of Moscow, to commemorate the Feast of the Epiphany. In the Orthodox tradition of Epiphany, Christians celebrate the Adoration of the Kings *and* the baptism of Christ in the Jordan. Each year, believers immerse themselves in water blessed by the clergy. As Putin descends into the lake, a priest holds above his head the most famous and venerated icon in Russia,

Our Lady of Kazan. Dressed in bright red and holding the Christ-Child, Mary solemnly blesses and guides the worshippers.

On the day of His baptism, Jesus came up out of the water and saw ‘the heavens open and the Spirit descend on Him, like a dove’. He heard a voice saying, ‘You are my beloved Son; in you, I take delight’. It is no surprise that Jesus was baptised by John: Jesus believed him to be Elijah returned to this life. Jesus described John not only as a prophet but as one greater than ‘all who have ever been born’. It was by the hand of this man dressed in rough coat of camel’s hair and leather belt, and eating a diet of locusts and honey, that Jesus was baptised. At baptism, Jesus had a vision and heard the voice of God.

The entire story is replete with imagery and meaning found in the *Tanakh*, our Old Testament. As it had done on many before Him, such as Gideon and Samson, the Spirit alighted on Jesus. In the Book of Acts, the apostle Paul baptised twelve believers in Ephesus: a Jewish symbol of completion and wholeness, like the twelve tribes of Israel and the twelve disciples of Jesus. For me, the Bible is a doorway into the Divine; its stories are rich, spiritual tapestries to be explored, imagined anew, and entered into. With imagination, we are

to see and feel the water of baptism flow over our heads, into our lives, into the very depths of our souls. Every day, through good and bad, in times of delight or struggle, the reformer Martin Luther, reminded himself, 'I am baptised'. He felt afresh the unconditional eternal love of God flow over him, hold and embrace him.

I wonder if we can give ourselves permission to trust for a moment the gifts of imagination. Are we able to set aside fleetingly our rational faculties and the crushing materialism of science? At the age of eight, the seminal poet and painter, William Blake said that he looked up into a mulberry tree and saw angels 'bespangling every bough like stars'. If not angels, may we not receive the air around us, the air we breathe, the fresh Ayrshire breeze, as a reminder of the waters of baptism, our baptism, of the Eternal's endless love for us?

The Celtic writer, Philip Newell, offers this short morning prayer:

Early in the morning I seek Your presence, O God,  
not because You are ever absent from me  
but because often I am absent from You  
at the heart of each moment  
where You forever dwell.  
In the rising of the sun,  
in the unfolding colour and shape of the morning  
open my eyes to the mystery of the moment  
that in every moment of the day  
I may know Your life-giving presence.

Open my eyes to this moment  
that in every moment  
I may know You as the One who is always now.

With imagination, feel the warmth of Your own baptism.

Amen.