

Reflections on Baptism

A sermon preached at St Peter's Wolvercote on Sunday 22 April 2007 (Easter 3) by the Revd Guy Wilkinson.

Baptisms are occasions when, quite naturally, we look forward and wonder what lies ahead for the person – child or adult – being baptised. Two Sundays ago – Easter Day – I was in a parish church in London where I baptised my granddaughter Martha. It seemed not so very long ago that my own father baptised Martha's father, my eldest son Hugh – although it was, in fact, 34 years ago in 1972.

As I held Martha in my arms I wondered about the way ahead for her. And I am sure that Cara and Martin will today be wondering what the future holds for Alexian. It's a natural thing, as we look at our children on occasions like this

- to be full of hopes and expectations for them
- to believe that everything is possible
- to want and intend the very best for them

No doubt this is, in part, why we bring our children for baptism – that it is part of wanting and doing the best for them. Of course we also have anxieties and fears – concerned about the complicated and difficult world in which we live. But today we are filled with hope and a sense of the *potential for flourishing* that is contained within this child Alexian at the beginning of his life.

Our hopes – for Martha, Alexian or any other child – are often these days caught up with the media and other discussions about the relative impact of 'nature' and 'nurture' on who we come to be

- 'nature' being our genetic inheritance, our DNA, which comes to each of us from our parents and their parents and all who came before them
- 'nurture' being the whole range of influences from our surroundings, particularly perhaps in the early years of our lives.

Often we hear more about nature – our genetic make up - than we do about nurture, and we frequently hear about nature – genetics – in ways that seem to indicate that we are mere prisoners of our DNA. In the most extreme versions, we have virtually no

influence on the way we shall go or the person we shall become - we are no more than the vehicle driven by our selfish genes.

I want, however, to suggest that there is a third factor – a third way - in the future that lies before Alexian – and each of us – and that it is the reason for what we shall shortly be doing – baptising Alexian. This third factor – third way – underlies and precedes both nature and nurture and conditions their impact. It is the love of God equally for all human beings ever born or to be conceived or born.

This love

- does not depend upon baptism
- is not increased or reduced by our genetic inheritance
- continues unchanged whatever the conditions of our upbringing

Baptism is the outward and visible sign of our hope and belief that there is more to Alexian and Martha's future than the interaction of nature and nurture alone. Baptism expresses this belief in a very public way. It is a manifesto, a declaration, a statement about a reality which is just as real as DNA or our environmental factors. And so we shall say together "This is our faith – we believe and trust in one God".

But *how* does this love of God for each person make a difference? How can it impact on and condition our nature and our nurture? Here are three thoughts on this

- By the unchanging standard that the love of God provides across all time, culture and circumstance. The love of God is always the same and we are changed by it – it is not changed by us. It is, if you like, the realisation that the earth moves and has its being because of and in relation to the Sun – not the other way round.
- Then by the way in which love by its nature is constantly offering alternatives to those provided by our nature and our nurture. "There is no alternative" is not in the vocabulary of love.
- and thirdly, by the way in which the love of God has a pro-active impact on the lives of all those around us and our children – those who make up our nurturing environment. It is reflected in our commitment to pray for him and walk with him in the way of Christ.

This is the Third Way and we can see something of its impact in the two bible stories today –

- Saul, being changed by the impact of the love of God for him, despite his nurture and his nature. Here is a third force intervening in the most dramatic way on all that his nature and nurture had brought him up to be.
- and Peter, already so aware of the ways in which his impulsive and insecure personality have led him to deny Jesus, is offered the third way – “do you love me? Feed my lambs” - three times he is asked.

So as we baptise Alexian and as we think about the impact on each of us of our own baptisms we can be encouraged by the conviction and the evidence of the third way – the way of God’s love, which sets us free from the shackles of nature and nurture.

Amen.