

Baptism of the Lord: 2018: St Barnabas.

'Who do you think you are'? It sounds rather a rude question, but I expect most of you know that it's the title of a very popular TV series in which celebrities uncover surprising facts about their ancestry. But it's not only celebrities who are interested in their origins. Sixty years ago my Aunt Norah was laboriously writing out our family tree in longhand; it wouldn't take her so long now, with the internet and genealogy sites to help. I suppose that it makes us feel that bit more secure, more grounded, in this topsy-turvy world, if we know who we are. Of course there are many many ways of answering the question 'who am I'? Most simply, I suppose, our name. Our membership of a choir, a club, an organisation, Yorkshire County Cricket Club if you're Geoffrey Boycott, and proud of it! Our job, even if we're retired; I was an engine driver (I wasn't of course, but I sometimes imagine I would like to have been). A family man, or woman. A single person. A Christian. Ah yes. And St Paul identified a whole range of callings under that heading: teaching, exhorting, performing acts of mercy, giving generously. A sinner, perhaps...no, not perhaps: definitely! What a huge question it is: who am I? Imprisoned in Germany towards the end of the 2<sup>nd</sup> world war for his opposition to the Nazi regime, the Lutheran pastor Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote a poem entitled just that: 'who am I?' He knows that others think of him as calm, cheerful, friendly, able to bear the days of misfortune smilingly and proudly, like one accustomed to win. But, he asks, 'Am I then really all that which other men tell of? Or am I only what I know of myself, restless, and longing and sick, like a bird in a cage, struggling for breath...weary and empty at praying...ready to say farewell to it all?' So if 'Who am I?' is at first sight a pretty simple question, actually, it's multi-layered, challenging and one which at times we might just want to evade. But it's certainly a question for a Christian to address honestly and prayerfully...do we really bring it, this question, into our prayers, our confessions? Do we find a trusted friend or guide with whom to face this question? 'Am I one person today, and tomorrow another?' asks Bonhoeffer; a hypocrite before others? But then he concludes the poem with this line: 'Whoever I am, thou knowest, O God, I am thine'. Before everything else, beyond all the evasions and pretences, a child of God, we might say. What greater truth, what simpler truth, to recall when we recall the vows of Holy Baptism, and when we welcome Clothilde among us as a fellow Christian, baptised a few weeks ago in Canada. Children of God, beloved children. 'Thou art my beloved Son'. The Father's word spoken at the baptism of Jesus: with thee I am well pleased. And in our baptism we are made 'members of Christ', the limbs of his body...so the word is spoken to us as well: You are my beloved sons and daughters. Let us not forget that having heard that word, Jesus, the Christ, God's anointed one, immediately faced the testings of forty days in the wilderness. Who was he? One who would dominate through the exercise of wealth and power and control of others? Or one who would live by every word which proceeds from the mouth of God? But what we may be sure that it was because he had heard, and assimilated into his inmost heart and mind the first word...thou art my beloved... that he was enabled to overcome the testing...that he lived, and spoke, and listened, in the deepest assurance that he was the beloved of the Father. That in him and through him the Spirit of God moved with creative power...like the Spirit in creation: that the Spirit transformed the ordinary men whom he encountered day by day...like the Spirit which came upon those baptised in his name, of whom we heard in the reading from the Acts of the Apostles. The same Spirit whom we summon in the Mass to transform the material elements of bread and wine into the living and life-giving presence of the beloved Son of God. As we renew our baptismal promises, as we rejoice with Clothilde, newly made a child of God and a member of Christ, may we hear and accept the voice from heaven: you are my beloved children. And may the Spirit of the Lord renew us, disentangle our knotted beings and empower us to live as what we are, in Christ, the beloved children of God.