

St Matthew's Oxhey – Parish Eucharist with Baptism (17th August 2025)

Jer.23:23-32; Luke 12:49-56

These are not the readings I'd necessarily have chosen for a christening!

I've come to bring fire to the earth, says Jesus. How I wish it were already kindled. Do you think I came to bring peace? No, I tell you, rather division. Or as St. Matthew records the same saying, not peace but a sword. Families will be torn apart because of me, set at each other's throats.

Then there's Jeremiah, speaking long before Jesus, speaking of those who claim to speak for God, and who tell people what they want to hear. Who speak smooth, consoling, comfortable things – who, as Jeremiah says, prophesy lies and the deceit of their own hearts. Is not my word like fire, God says, like a hammer that breaks a rock in pieces? Am I a God nearby? That is, a God who is cosy, comfortable, predictable, fitting in with how we see things and want things. No, I'm a God far off: mysterious, severe, frightening.

The emergency exit doors, Lauren and family, are situated at the rear of the building. It is not too late to flee!!

No, these are definitely not the readings I'd have chosen for Amelia's christening. Our readings, some of you will know, are not in fact chosen at all – at least not by us. These are the readings that most of the Church across the world is reading today. If it was just us choosing for this morning, we'd have something more lovely, more reassuring. A reading full of love and grace and peace and joy. Of unconditional welcome and blessing.

And of course, such a reading would be true. God is full of joy at this new little human person. He surrounds her with love and blessing, He wants to fill her with it. He loves her before she knows it, before she deserves it, before she can do anything – his love shines on her like the sun does, freely, gloriously, abundantly. There's nothing more important to remember than that.

However, it's only true as one element of a bigger picture, and yes, a more complicated picture. The picture given by our readings. Am I not a God who is far off, as well as near. There's always something about God, and about Jesus who is God among us, that isn't so easy, and so obviously welcome. There's always something that isn't just about giving us what we want and making us feel good. He's not the fairy godmother. At the beginning of Luke's Gospel, even when Jesus was just a small baby, it was said of him: 'this child is destined for the falling and rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign which will be opposed'. The falling and rising of many, a sign which will be opposed. There's something about Jesus which isn't easy. Which invites resistance, rejection.

What is that? Well, at least two things, I think. Two related things.

Number one, his claim to be the King – his claim, that is, to be the one who gets to tell us what to do. There's something astonishingly presumptuous, even arrogant, about Jesus Christ. Arrogant, that is, if he is not who Christians say he is, if He is not God made man. I am the centre of the universe, he says effectively. I am the one around whom your life must revolve. I am not just your friend, or your therapist, or your comforter. I'm your King. Bend the knee, and do what you're told. It's not the only note in what he says, but it's one of them, and it tends, unsurprisingly, to provoke resistance. Most of us would rather be our own King, thank you very much. Nobody tells *us* what to do. We're in charge. It doesn't tend to work out very well for us, but still we like to cling to the idea that we run our own lives. The most offensive claim of Jesus is, perhaps, that we can't. We're not qualified. He's the King.

Number two, what the King actually commands. Give, give, and give again. Give in the obvious sense of sharing your money with the poor, but give in every sense. Make your life about serving people, about kneeling down and washing people's feet. Make strangers welcome. Make sure the weakest and the smallest are looked after, and given most attention. Treat the prisoners and the homeless and the sick as if they were God. Love even the people who have done you serious wrong: forgive them, and work for their good. Give, give, give. That's what the King did, that's what he was doing on the Cross, and it's what he commands his subjects to do. Unsurprisingly, it's not the most popular order ever given. It provokes resistance and rejection, all around the world and within

each one of us. That's why the world is the mess it is. And why this service, like every Sunday service, began with us confessing our share in it.

So on reflection, these readings aren't actually that bad a choice for a christening, or a baptism. Amelia is loved unconditionally. She is blessed. God is full of joy at her existence. All of this is true: absolutely, emphatically true. And yet, baptism is not just a blessing, not just a celebration. It's the beginning of a new life, where someone says yes – yes, Jesus is King, and my life will be lived under Him, in Him. I'll obey Him. His law will be my law. I'll let his way of doing things, his way of being – give, give, give – get inside me and fill me. And I recognise, I get, that that's a struggle, that there will be much in this world and much in me that pulls against that. We're not actually going to use these words in the baptism rite which follows, but many baptisms include the line that the baptised person is called to 'fight valiantly against sin, the world, and the devil'. To fight valiantly. Being part of God's kingdom, in this world, right now, is going to be hard.

Which is why, if what is being done today is going to work, going to be real, it can't just be about today. Amelia, you're going to have to learn how to be a Christian. Have to learn all about the King – and he is a great King. All about what he wants, and how to cope when you mess it up, as you undoubtedly will, because we all do. About everything He has already done for you, and everything He promises you in the future. About all the strength he'll give you for your life, above all here in the communion, with what we'll do in just a little while with the bread and the wine. They'll become his body and his blood, given to feed us, to feed *you*.

You have so much to learn, so much to discover. You have been brought into something wonderful which you need to explore. And the place to do that is here, every Sunday, with these people, doing these things. Be part of this Church. Make your christening real. I'm speaking to Amelia, but of course for now that's a bit unfair: Lauren, Isabelle, Samantha, Aimee – as mum, as godparents, as sponsor: this is on you. Bring Amelia here. Help her along the way, and find it for yourselves too. It's the way to life. Of course, I'm not the Vicar but I know I can promise you will all always find a welcome here at St. Matthew's.

So ... now, having spoken a great deal about baptism, we're going to do it...

