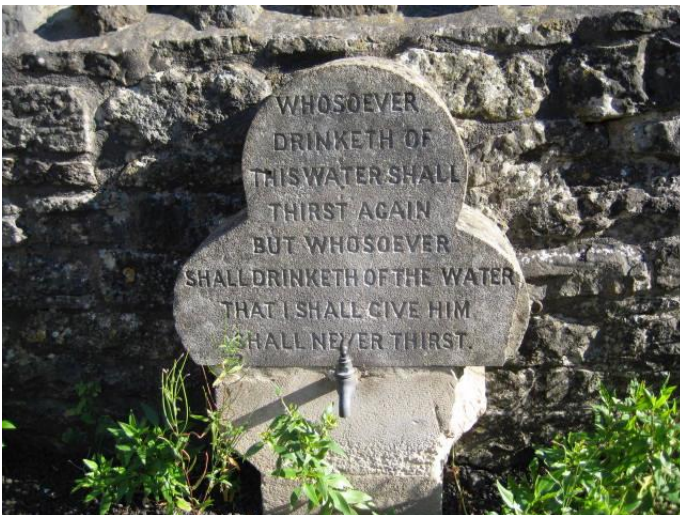


Sermon at the Cathedral Eucharist

Second Sunday after Pentecost

19th April 2022

There is a village in Somerset whose curate I used to be. Long before I turned up, the village used to have a small but flourishing Baptist church. There were two or three places along the village street where there had been a well or a spring, where you could fill your bucket of water from a tap. The springs were still marked with carved stones with verses from the Bible, and I always wondered if the Baptists had done that. The stones said *There is a river the stream whereof shall make glad the city of God, and Whosoever drinketh of this water shall thirst again but whosoever shall drink of the water that I shall give shall never thirst.* Although actually it said *whosoever shall drinketh*, because the carver got a bit carried away with all the 'eth's.



Apart from the stones, the Baptist church was just a memory for the older people. Some of them had come to the parish church – one played the organ, and every so often when there was a good rousing hymn, like 'Guide me O thou great Jehovah', you would remember that Keith the organist was a Baptist at heart because he would always do a repeat of the final verse. There was a little river that ran through the village, at the bottom of the combe, and some of the older people used to say that the

decline in the Baptist church had set in when they started baptising people indoors instead of taking them down to the river and plunging them in. I could never really imagine how they did that, because the river only came up to your knees at best. Maybe you could only be baptised if the river was in spate.

Full immersion is the old-school way of being baptised. It still happens – you need a pool or a tank, or a priest who's an enthusiast for cold water swimming. You know what being baptised is like here, where we bless the water in the font and splash it over the forehead of the person being baptised. But with full immersion, and I have never done it, you get alongside the person, you put a hand on the small of their back and the other hand on their shoulder, and you tip them backwards so they go right under and come up spluttering.

And then they get dressed. This is why we're thinking about full immersion, because we need to understand the second reading and why Paul thinks baptism is about clothes. Baptism is a symbolic death – that's what going right under the water is all about. *All of us who have been baptised into Christ Jesus were baptised into his death*, says Paul. But then we come up out of the water into a new life. So you have to get dressed. You're soaking

wet, after all. People mark the symbolism of this new life with what they wear. There's a very old tradition of coming up out of the water and being clothed in a new white robe. The early Christians used to do that. But centuries before them – baptism is older than Christianity – people probably did the same. New clothes for a new life. Certainly Paul is thinking of clothes in the second reading, when he writes about baptism to the Christians in Galatia.

As many of you as were baptised into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ.

You have stripped off the old life and washed it away. You have come up out of the water and been clothed in Christ.

And there in the Gospel story again there are clothes. The man who had demons had for a long time worn no clothes. He's interesting, this man. He's a man of the city – the city was probably no bigger than my little Somerset village, but it was called a city. He's a man of the city but he's not living in his house, he's living among the tombs. The tombs would have been outside the city, out on the edge. The man is alienated, made other. He is himself, but he isn't able to be himself because of whatever he's suffering from. He can't live in his house. He can't wear his clothes.

Jesus gets out off the boat and encounters this man. But no, he doesn't. He encounters the otherness of this man, the alienation. It's the demons Jesus seems to be talking to. And something interesting is happening there too, if this was a sermon about demons. The demons recognise who Jesus is; they call him by name, they call him Son of God. They know he can expel them. And they're terrified of being sent back into the abyss. What happens to them, and to the unfortunate swine, seems to dramatise that fear of emptiness, of falling into nothingness. They will have nowhere to be – they will have to be nowhere.

But this isn't a sermon about demons. This is a sermon about clothes. After Jesus had sent the demons away, the man was found clothed and in his right mind, sitting at Jesus' feet. And that's almost the end of the story. The man wants to go with Jesus, but Jesus says to him what he says to so many of the people he heals:

'Return to your home, and declare how much God has done for you.' So he went away.

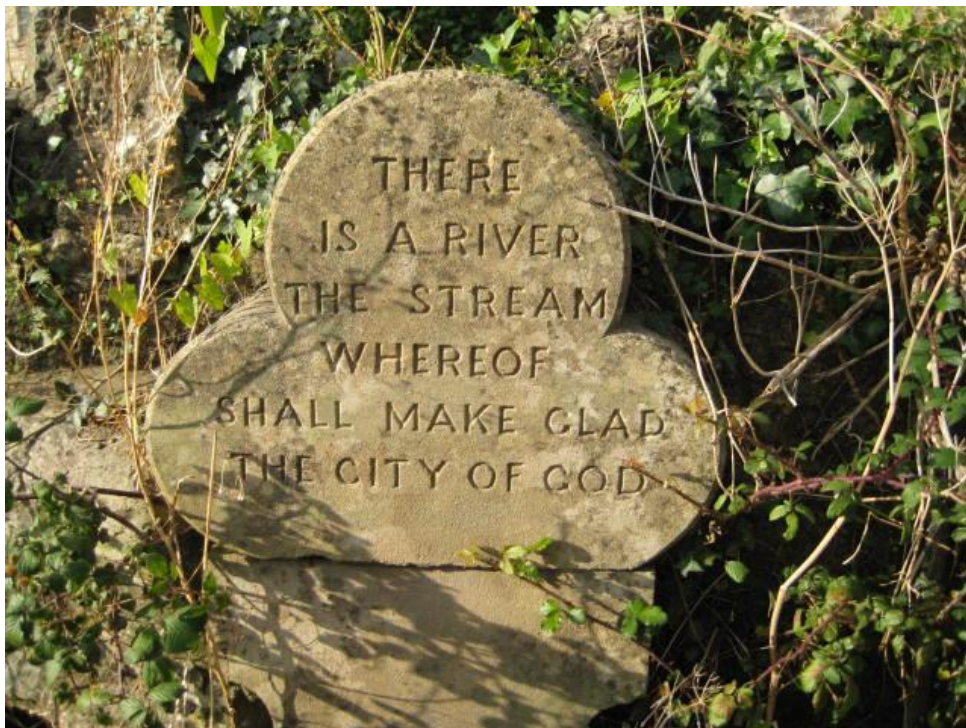
Why is this a sermon about clothes? Why is it the clothes I'm noticing? I think because the clothes help me notice what Jesus always says when he heals someone, and help me notice what's happening then. Jesus says to people 'Go home' and 'Pick up your bed and walk'. He's sending them back into their communities to be themselves. They couldn't before. Something was stopping them. But now they are free, they are healed. It's a transformative moment. Everything has changed. They are like the newly baptised person coming up spluttering out of the water.

And I think often we stick on that moment. But the story goes on. The clothes remind us that the story goes on. They haven't been set free into a kind of abyss, a sort of total existential freedom. They haven't been stripped down to some kind of essence of themselves. They've been made whole, and the wholeness includes other people. They're been set free to be themselves, in all their complexity, in their homes and relationships and

communities. They will have somewhere to be. It's more than a healing of one person. It's a restoration of community.

So the person gets dressed, and picks up their bedding, and go home. And they take something with them as well as the clothes and the bedding. They take something transformative back into the city, back into their homes and relationships and communities. We take it with us wherever we go when we leave here. *'Return to your home, and declare how much God has done for you,'* says Jesus to the man. *So he went away, proclaiming throughout the city how much Jesus had done for him.*

Someone calls him, this man, the first apostle to the Gentiles. Maybe he did something like carving stones for his village, for the springs and wells. *Whosoever shall drink of the water that I shall give shall never thirst. So that people would remember this transformation every time they did something ordinary like going to fetch water. There is a river the stream whereof shall make glad the city of God.*



The Very Revd Dr Elizabeth Thomson

Rector & Provost