**Sermon Ness 13th January 2019**

One day last week I flicked the TV on as I very occasionally do to quickly catch up with the news as I ate my lunch. The usual problem happened – the channels aren’t numbered anything like they used to be, and I don’t understand the new system, apparently the TV connections aren’t working properly in the new house, I couldn’t work out how to work the remote to go onto Iplayer, and so the choices were either watch what the previous person had been watching or just switch off. I’d always opted previously at this point just to switch it off, and enjoy some silence, but this time something caught my attention! The channel was ‘Comedy Central’ - I’d never heard of that before but obviously someone else in my household had! The programme was called ‘Impractical Jokers’ – about 4 men playing practical jokes on strangers - and it was just hilarious. In one scene the men and their four dogs were in a park. One of them was sent off with his dog, and had to ask a stranger to hold the dog as he had to go off and attend to something else. He told the stranger the name of the dog and gave a reason why the dog had this particular name. What the stranger didn’t know was that the man had a hidden earpiece and the other 3 men were hidden in the trees telling him what to say and they were making up the most crazy names and crazy stories that he then had to relay to the stranger. When the first man left his dog with the stranger, one of his mates sauntered up and started asking questions about the dog. The winner of the game was how accurately the stranger recounted the story of how the dog came to be named! It was very funny. And I was tempted to carry on watching all afternoon … and not get back to work!

Recounting the story is a theme in what the Baptism of Christ is all about. If we follow the thread through our lectionary readings for today, in Isaiah we have the story of being created and belonging to God, and of being loved and named; in the reading from Acts we have the story of baptisms in Samaria, the laying on of hands, and the receiving of the Holy Spirit, and in our Gospel reading we heard of the first baptisms by John the baptizer in water and his message that Jesus the Messiah would baptise with the holy spirit and with fire, and then this is followed by the story of Jesus himself being baptised by John, and the descent of the Holy Spirit: stories from ancient times and from prophecy weaving down through the history of Christianity one from one generation to the next, with a natural progression of the story from that prophecy to its fulfilment in the baptism of Jesus. It’s the recounting of the story which has kept the essence of the story going.

What kind of story of our faith and our baptisms do we tell today and how do we tell it? I think today we’re fearful to tell our story. It’s not a popular story, in fact the story of a personal belief in the Christian faith has seemingly become less and less attractive in the face of so many other exciting stories in today’s culture. As someone who has a heart for justice and a heart for the persecuted church, I was really heartened to hear a couple of weeks ago that Jeremy Hunt was eager to protect Christians who wanted to tell their story but were persecuted for doing so; in the same way that persecuted minorities of other faith denominations frequently come to the attention of the media, so, he said, the Christian story also must be valued and respected across the world. From what I recall he didn’t go quite so far as saying that being a Christian in England is also a challenge – but I think that’s true. Telling our story can be tricky – we find we have to pick our moments, and the people we may choose to share our story with, with care, and I suspect that’s because we might be faced with ridicule.

It’s not easy being a Christian in England right now – it’s not popular, and as crazy as this may be, we may even face being accused of discriminating against those of other faiths.

So, how can we tell the story of Jesus Christ today? Our own baptisms are a part of that witness to our inherited faith. And when we have other families in to church who have come to have their children baptised, we’re given an opportunity to share our story.

But as we know, those opportunities are limited. These days we may only have a handful of infant baptisms in each year. And they tend to come for that and tend to go away again. This is something I ponder and contemplate a lot – why is it that they come, and yet disappear again? One of my favourite jokes is that if you have a problem with bats in your church, then baptise them, and they’ll not return!

But there’s something very serious in this and something we need to pray about. The fundamental question is, I think, what is it about the world out there which seems to be a more exciting and interesting story to be engaged in than our story of faith?

I want to pick up on just one verse from the reading we heard from Isaiah -

When you pass through the waters, I will be with you;  
   and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you;  
when you walk through fire you shall not be burned…

I think that the church in the past has had a reputation of trying to sell Christianity as though it will solve all problems and resolve all difficulty – and that sadness and tragedy won’t come to those who believe in Jesus or those sadnesses and tragedies are in some way lessened if we’re Christians. The Bible as I understand it teaches us quite the opposite: Isaiah said ‘when’ you pass through the waters / and ‘when’ you walk through fire….I will be with you.

Not that the rivers and waters and the fire don’t happen and don’t hurt, but instead acknowledging head on that they do hurt – and that difficult and bad things happen. But the promise is that God is there too, with us, Emmanuel, helping us and accompanying us through the hard times. There is no room for a story which sells Christianity as a pretence that life with Jesus will be just fine.

The story that we tell then can be a compelling one as long as we’re honest and never try to pretend that things are perfect – and worse still that by joining the church all will be ok. The story instead must surely speak of imperfection. And that’s the whole point: Jesus came for all those who acknowledge their weaknesses, their vulnerabilities, for those who do wrong, for those who feel lost. And through baptism we come to know and understand the reassurance that in all situations, the good times and the bad, that God is with us, never leaves us, and is with us through eternity. And like our practical jokers in the story of the names of their dogs in the park, what kind of a story would you be prepared to share with strangers?