

12 January 2020: Isaiah 42:1-9, Matthew 3:13-end
Affirmation encourages us in our work as Christ's people.

The word that stuck in my mind after reading these two passages is “affirmation”. I planned to start by telling you about the advice given to Ewan and me that this should be a foundation upon which to build our marriage. Good advice to a newly wedded couple and relevant to what I am about to say. Then on Friday, I went to dance fit, an exercise class at Horfield Sports Centre. The instructor, Matt has a passion for dancing which he shares by encouraging a hall full of mostly middle-aged women to let their hair down a little to improve fitness and have fun. Through a mixture of self-deprecation and affirmation, he encourages us to strut, stretch and wiggle in ways that, I for one, would never normally attempt in public. Somehow, he makes this a positive and enjoyable start to the weekend.

Affirmation is important in any relationship, both with those we are close to and those we come into contact with more casually. It is recognised as good practice socially and in the workplace. It is important to help people work to their potential and to promote good mental health. In our society which is often quick to find fault and look for someone to blame this is a culture to which we should aspire.

Both passages today start with statements of affirmation from God. Following Jesus's baptism, the heavens opened and a voice from heaven said,

“This is my son whom I love. With him I am well pleased.”

But what is it that has pleased God so much? It is worth noting that at this point in the Gospel, Jesus ministry has not yet started. There have been no miracles, no healing, no casting out of demons. In fact, what we know of Jesus's life so far has been characterised more by things that have been done to him than by things he has done. We have learnt who Jesus is, through the genealogy and the references to the Old Testament. Jesus has been born into poverty, threatened by King Herod, worshipped by the Magi and protected by Joseph. He has grown up and lived as man and boy in the local community, but at this stage Jesus himself, has done nothing extraordinary.

Now that has changed. By insisting on being baptised, Jesus, God in human form, has chosen to align himself with humanity. A choice which will be put to the test shortly after when Jesus is tempted in the wilderness. It seems timely then that God's approval is voiced at this stage. God loves his son, as he loves each of us, not for what he has done, but for the human being that he is and the choice he makes about who he wants to be with.

The servant in Isaiah receives similar words of affirmation. This passage, along with others in Isaiah, is often seen to be about Jesus. Matthew quotes it later in his Gospel referring specifically to Jesus as he goes about his ministry (Ch 12). The words of the prophets can often have meanings on different levels. Another interpretation is that the servant is in fact, God's community. One article I read notes that when the servant figure is referenced elsewhere in Isaiah, he is given the name Israel. This could be simply for ease of reference, but it could also indicate that the “servant” is in fact God's people. This is the interpretation adopted in the Jewish faith. The people of Israel are called upon collectively, to be a servant to the world and a light to others. We could equally see it as the Christian community, united through baptism in the Holy

Spirit as the body of Christ to carry out God's work. Paul makes this link between Christ the person, baptism and the Christian Community in 1 Cor 12.

"For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ. For in the one Spirit we were all baptized into one body—Jews or Greeks, slaves or free—and we were all made to drink of one Spirit."

The placing of the Holy Spirit on both the servant and Jesus is another common factor between the passages. I suggested above that affirmation helps us reach our full potential. Affirmation is more than a compliment. It implies that something has been done or is being done. It implies encouragement, maybe even guidance. So, the Holy Spirit settles on Jesus before leading him into the desert to be tempted. It is sent to encourage and support the servant in the task God has planned for him.

God's words affirm Jesus, both for who he is and who he wants to be with rather than for what he has done. He sends the Holy Spirit to help, encourage guide and support Jesus and Jesus response is one of obedience and love. In the same way, God loves us. Not because of what we have done or not done, but because of who we are and the choices we make. Might we too respond in obedience and love? Through God's affirmation and the presence of the Holy Spirit. We too, can be encouraged, guided and supported to reach our potential and become the individuals and the community God wants us to be.

I wonder how our church community might respond to the passage. I'd like you to think on this as I read verses 3 and 4 again, but from the Message version,

"He won't brush aside the bruised and the hurt, and he won't disregard the small and insignificant, but he will steadily and firmly set things right. He won't tire out and quit. He won't be stopped until he's finished his work – to set things right on earth"

Members of this church are involved in many areas of political, social and environmental action. Some are actively involved, some support through prayer or by encouraging and supporting those who take a more "hands on" role. I would like to take this opportunity to voice my appreciation to those who are involved with Henleaze Hospitality, Hidden Voices, the Sisters of the Church, School Governance and our Local Council. There will be many others, from major campaigns to small acts of kindness in the workplace and elsewhere. We value all that you do.

The start of a New Year is a good time to reconsider your place in the body of Christ, including all the all roles we take on in the wider community, including our places of work, our families, our friendship groups and the places we choose to spend our spare time. I was recently reminded that although Jesus is often pictured with long hair robes and sandals walking through Judean villages, he is equally at home in the hi tech, silicon chipped finance dominated world of modern business, or even in an exercise class. Have you seen the mural of breakdancing Jesus in Stokes Croft? How are we living as Christ's representatives in these groups?

Perhaps one way we can share God's love is by adopting his practice of affirmation. Who might you encourage today? Maybe you could open your mind to new ideas or practices. Even if these are not your preference, is there something positive you can take from them and share? We don't always agree with each other, that is part of the beauty of our community, often it is how we grow, but we can encourage guide and support each other, we are all God's children, and all dearly loved.

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