



Darlington  
Methodist  
District

January 2022

Dear friends,

Greetings to you and your loved ones as we begin a new year together. In recent days I have been re-reading parts of Timothy Radcliffe's wonderful book on baptism, *Take the Plunge Living Baptism and Confirmation*, in preparation for a sermon on the baptism of Jesus. I was struck in particular by two chapters he writes on the links between baptism and holiness. Of course, holiness is an important part of the Methodist tradition. Although the Deed of Union, which brought together the different strands of British Methodism, is in some respects a compromise document, it nevertheless affirms a common memory:

*'It ever remembers that in the providence of God Methodism was raised up to spread scriptural holiness through the land by the proclamation of the evangelical faith and declares its unfaltering resolve to be true to its divinely appointed mission.'*

We may each interpret that in different ways placing the emphasis variously on personal, social or communal holiness. However we interpret it, we cannot ignore it. Radcliffe both affirms and dismisses one way of interpreting holiness: on the one hand, baptism in the early Church was about the call to be 'shining examples' of Christ; on the other, he protests against a vision of saints who are '...cardboard caricatures, thin-blooded creatures', not earthed in the day to day realities which we all face. That is a challenge for any Church which places an emphasis on holiness.

It is easy to look at the Church and see that we are not obviously saints. Yet there is something liberating in realising that holiness springs primarily from participating in and sharing in God's holiness; it is not something which belongs to us but something we are called to journey into and discover both personally and together. There is room for us even though we may be broken and fragmented and that is something we share with all humanity. In journeying into God's holiness we are discovering our true selves.

There is another dimension to this though which I find helpful and which is evident in the texts about Jesus' baptism in the Jordan. In seeking to be baptised by John the Baptist, Jesus is expressing the depth of God's utter solidarity with humanity. For me this means that nothing we do, however mundane it may seem, happens outside of God. Whatever we are doing at this moment or in the next, whoever we speak to or serve, whatever life sets before us, these are the contexts in which holiness is worked out. I wonder if this might be the heart of what we are being called to do when we recite the Covenant Prayer together.

Let me leave you with part of a prayer from the Covenant Service as we begin a new year and prepare to 'shine forth' as we celebrate Epiphany

*Create in me a clean heart, O God,*

*And renew a right spirit within me.*

*Give me the joy of your help again*

*And strengthen me with a willing spirit.*

*(Methodist Worship Book, p.286)*

Happy New Year!

Revd Richard Andrew

Chair, Darlington District