

**THE WATER OF LIFE –  
Baptism of Lily and Henry Pummell**

Easter VI  
Sunday May 10th  
St. Michael, Cornhill  
© The Rt Revd Dr Stephen Platten

Some of you may have come across the English explorer and adventurer, Wilfrid Thesiger. Living to a great age and indeed dying not that long ago, he was an intrepid and courageous adventurer, risking his life in the desert with the Marsh Arabs, and exploring parts of Africa with much daring. His was a life full of surprises. He was born, at the turn of the twentieth century, the son of the Minister (what we'd now call the ambassador) in a kraal in the Embassy compound in Addis Adaba, the capital of what was then called Abyssinia. The compound there is the largest of any British embassy throughout the world – large enough to encompass a nine hole golf course!

Thesiger knew both the Emperor Haile Selassie and his father; he also came to know much of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church. Now I begin here, since that is where our first reading began – with the encounter between Philip, the apostle, and the Ethiopian eunuch. It is one of the most exotic tales in the New Testament. The eunuch is the sort of 'Chancellor of the Exchequer' to the Queen of Ethiopia. The final result of the encounter is, of course, the baptism of the Ethiopian. It's not a bad starting point today, as we baptise Lily and Henry Pummell – what a joy to be baptising, or *Christening* twins!

Now despite being exotic, the Ethiopian Church is a good starting point for us. It is unique in Christendom – very ancient, tracing its roots back to the second century and with very strong Jewish influences. The Emperor Haile Selassie even called himself the 'Lion of Judah'. But Ethiopia's claim on us here this morning is its firm focus on baptism. At Epiphany, the time after Christmas, when we *normally* remember the Magi, the Wise Men paying homage to Jesus, at *this* time, there is an enormous religious gathering on the banks of the great River Nile.

At this ceremony or rite, which is known as *Timqat*, a replica of the Jewish 'Ark of the Covenant' is taken to the banks of the river. Thousands of people are baptised in the river and others celebrate and renew their own baptismal vows once again. Philip's encounter with the Ethiopian is doubtless one of the roots and origins of the *Timqat* rite. There's no doubt for Ethiopians that baptism is the key to the Christian life. Here is celebrated God's cleansing of us; here is celebrated the saving of ancient Israel by passing dry-foot through the Red Sea; here we rehearse Jesus' going down into the tomb and being raised by God at Easter.

So, here *we are*, in Eastertide, doing what God's Church has done – in different ways – from the very beginnings of Christianity. Our readings today capture what God is doing for Henry and Lily and indeed, at the same time as all of us are sprinkled. We too are reminded of what God has done for all of us. But what does this mean for us? What response is called out of us? What do those amazing hi-jinks by the River Nile say to present-day Ethiopians – or indeed to us?

The answer to those questions is there in the story of Philip and the Ethiopian – this exotic figure asks for baptism. But our second reading and the gospel tell us more. From the first letter of John we heard:

'Beloved, let us love one another, for love is of God; everyone who loves is born of God and knows God.'

So the key response to God's generosity in baptism is the response of *love*. Baptism is not just for Lily and Henry individually. It calls out of all of us *love*, it calls out of us to live as community. It tells us what we both owe God and each other. God's gift to us in Jesus Christ – in Jesus' coming among us and in his death and resurrection, calls out of us a reciprocal love of God, but also for each other.

The piece we heard from the gospel clothes it in a still more powerful image. In that passage from John's gospel, we heard Jesus saying:

'I am the true vine, and my Father is the vine-grower . . . I am the vine and you are the branches.'

Using that attractive image, we are all grafted into the life of the Body of Christ, God's Children. Little Lily and Henry are, although at present they won't be conscious of it, becoming part of this community with all the rest of us.

So let us then welcome them into our midst, and let us also be sure that they are nurtured in this community. Then, when they are old enough to know for themselves, they will be part of not just St. Michael's, Cornhill, but of the whole mighty host of God's people, both living and those who have gone before. They are now - along with us – members of the *Easter People* and Alleluia is our song!

Amen

Readings:

Acts 8. 26 – end

I John. 4. 7 – 12

John. 15. 1-8