

BEATRICE – LIGHT AND LOVE

Epiphany 1.

Sunday January 11th

St Anne, Hoxton

Baptism of Beatrice Woods

At home on our shelves where all the art books are set out, pride of place goes to a *Thames and Hudson* volume titled simply *From Giotto to Cézanne*. To call it an upmarket ‘bluff your way in art’ would not do it justice – it is far more than that, but its title is certainly very illuminating. For the title is almost a framing of the entire period of western art from the time it left behind the Byzantine artistic style of icons to the beginnings of cubism and modernism. Giotto was the genius who set this in motion.

Now, if we were to be looking for a parallel figure in Italian *literature*, the wreath would go to but one person, Dante Alighieri, or simply Dante as he’s most often known. Dante was a contemporary of Giotto’s and indeed they were friends. Both were geniuses and without a doubt Dante’s greatest work was the *Divine Comedy* – embracing the Inferno, Purgatorio and Paradiso – Hell, Purgatory and Heaven. But more importantly still for us this morning, the *Comedy* would never even have been written, had Dante not met one Signorita Portinare whose Christian name was *Beatrice*. It is of course, of another Beatrice we are all thinking today. But, in a moment I shall return to Dante and to Beatrice Portinare.

From whence precisely does the name Beatrice originate? Well, the answer is that it is originally a Latin name, Veatrix, and it meant ‘voyager’ or ‘traveller’. Later it was Christianised to mean ‘blessed’, that is Beatrix or Beatrice. But, for a moment, let’s return to Veatrix, for today is *indeed* a day of voyaging or travelling, as we celebrate young Beatrice Woods’ baptism into the Church of God. Think back to all three readings. In different ways each is about a journey.

The reading from Genesis is of the ultimate journey, the journey from nothingness to existence, from an earth which was without form and void, a pitch black wasteland – to our world of light and life. From the Acts of the Apostles, we read of a different journey. Here Paul journeys through the ancient world, through Asia Minor encountering youthful and tiny Christian communities which were themselves on a journey, where baptism itself was a key landmark or milestone on that journey.

Finally we arrive at that extraordinary and dramatic gospel passage. Only Mark with his terse narrative and speed of story-telling could capture it quite like that. First comes the melodramatic and rugged figure of John the Baptist. Then there's the extraordinary inversion of roles – Jesus, God, Incarnate, asks baptism of John, his prophetic forerunner. Finally there is the amazing and terrifying *epiphany* or *theophany*, with the voice of God, not just breaking through the clouds. Instead in the most exaggerated language we are told, by Mark, that as Jesus came up out of the water, the heavens were unzipped, torn apart from end to end. It is the curtain being raised on a new world.

So, baptism (Christening as it's popularly called when it's of babies) – baptism is no dramatic rite of passage set in a private world of its own. Instead, this morning, Beatrice reminds us that in Jesus Christ's appearing – and his being sealed by baptism – in this, the world is transformed. Paganism was alive and well and had an energy of its own at the time of John but it was an energy pervaded by sadness, by absolute fatalism. But, in Jesus, hope is born. So now let us return to Dante which was where we came in.

Dante first saw Beatrice when she was a girl of nine years old and he himself was a good deal older. But Dante entered into a visionary relationship with Beatrice. He gazed upon her, as upon a vision from afar. But, at that strong distance, he fell passionately in love with her. As he

dwelt on that passionate love, so it completely transformed his view of human existence. Beatrice died in her late teens, but Dante's passion for her lived on and it completely transfigured his understanding of the love of God. Love of God and for God was, for Dante, no less passionate. Responding to this extraordinary story, more than three generations ago now, Charles Williams, a novelist with the strongest of imaginations wrote his classic *The Figure of Beatrice: A Study in Dante*.

In his book, Williams showed how Dante's passion for Beatrice, which provoked both his poem *La Vita Nuova* and the *Divine Comedy* saw how as he was in love with the vision of Beatrice, so too he was bathed in the light of God's passionate love. It was a love that turned void and waste into love – darkness into light. It was a love that turned a tiny Christian group into a faith that spans our world. It was a passion that would split the heavens open in Jesus' baptism. Now that's something worth celebrating. Beatrice, this morning, in her baptism is once again showing how our lives are transformed in Jesus Christ.

Amen

Readings: Genesis. 1. 1-5
Act. 19. 1-7
Mark. 1. 4-11