

St. Ninian's Parish Church
Sunday 13th January 2019

Luke 3: 15 - 22

One of the best things about my holiday last week was not hearing the alarm go off in the morning, and being able to wake up when I woke up rather than when someone or something else decides I should wake up. After New Year, when I was on holiday, when I woke up each morning over the course of the week, there were two voices on the pillow next to me – both coming from the radio when I switched it on.

The first was the voice of Neil MacGregor, who was director of the British Museum for thirteen years and who has also written a number of books including *The History of the World in 100 Objects*. His latest project, serialised on the radio over the New Year holiday, was called *As Others See Us*.

As Others See Us was a series of five radio programmes in which Neil MacGregor talked to people from five countries, which have all had a very particular relationship with the U.K. - Germany, Egypt, Nigeria, Canada and India. Neil MacGregor talked to these people about their impression from abroad of the U.K. at the start of this significant year in the U.K.'s history.

All these countries have a long and a significant history with the U.K., and the programmes were a reminder that countries don't exist entirely independently of one another. A great deal of what forms a nation's understanding of itself and the character of its people, are a nation's relationships with other people and other nations: nations we fought wars against; nations who speak the same language; nations we colonised, for example. How we see ourselves depends a lot on how we see others, and how they see us, that is to say, who we are as a nation depends to a large extent on our relationships with other nations.

Neil MacGregor's radio programme was about 45 minutes long, and afterwards there was another programme, Book of the Week, which was a reading of a book by the late physicist Professor Stephen Hawking called *Brief Answers to Big Questions*. Much like Neil MacGregor's programme, Stephen Hawking's book highlights the nature and the importance of relationships.

From a physicist's perspective everything in this universe exists because of its relationship to everything else. Time, matter and space, which form the universe, exist only because of their relationship to one another, which is why, apparently, $E = mc^2$.

Fundamentally, it is not the case that everything from time itself, to you and me, to the stones of this building, are just *influenced* by other objects, it is that all objects are *created* out of their relationships to other objects. Nothing in

this universe is independent, everything exists only because of its relationship to everything else.

If you want to understand anything about countries, or people, or the world, a good place to start might be to look at how that country or that person or that world related to everything else around about it. Take a person for example, there is an old Japanese proverb that says, 'When the character of a person is not clear to you, look at that person's friends.'

Perhaps that is also a good place to start if, rather than trying to understand the character of someone else, you wanted to understand your own character. If you want to understand who you are, perhaps you should ask yourself, who are my friends, or who am I in relationship with, or what am I in relationship with?

Relationships are at the heart of all our Bible readings this morning. The prophet Isaiah describes God's relationship to Israel, and contained within what God says to his nation are words about Israel's relationship to other nations. In so many ways the people of Israel understood themselves, and understood who God was, as a consequence of their nation's relationship to other nations around about: Egypt, the nation that it escaped from, for example; Assyria and Babylon the nations that took it in to exile; and nations like Edom that bordered Israel.

In the book of Acts a group of people in Samaria had been baptised, but baptism was not enough to ensure their Christian formation, they needed more; they needed to experience a relationship with God. The passage we read describes how they experienced God, mediated by the Holy Spirit, through a relationship with other Christians, Peter and John. Their baptism opened the door to their faith formation, and their faith was formed by their relationship to others.

The Gospel reading is also full of relationships: there is the relationship between Jesus and John the Baptist; between Jesus and the people who were also being baptised, those who were part of the 'general baptism of the people,' and who were on, 'the tiptoe of expectation'; and between Jesus and God, mediated again by the Holy Spirit in the form of a dove.

When people have tried to discover something about who Jesus was, there has always been a debate about when, if at all, Jesus himself understood who he was and what the purpose of his life was. Was he aware of who he was from birth? Or did that awareness come later at the moment of his baptism? Or was it later still, on the mountain top when he was transfigured? Or did it not come until he faced his crucifixion, or even until his resurrection?

The four Gospels seem to disagree. Matthew and Luke have stories of Jesus' birth, and seem to suggest that it was at his birth that Jesus was chosen by God. The Gospel of Mark doesn't have a birth story, it begins with the story of Jesus' baptism, but even then for Mark it is not until his resurrection that who Jesus is, is fully revealed. The Gospel of John on the other hand begins Jesus' story well before his birth, Jesus is present at the creation of the universe, he is the eternal one, co-existent with God.

In seeking to understand who Jesus was, amidst all these differing accounts, it might be helpful to apply the Japanese proverb and look at who he was in relationship with. At whatever point we think Jesus became fully aware of who he was, his baptism is significant, for it is in that event that he begins to establish his relationships: at his baptism, as Luke recounts it, a relationship is established between him and God, and between him and the crowd - the people with whom he lived.

Those two relationships, one with God and one with the people he would live with and minister to, begin the formation of his spiritual character and his human ministry. Jesus doesn't exist as someone separate from the people around him, nor is he someone whose life is separated from God. In living as a consequence of this baptism, Jesus ensures that his relationships are filled with a spirit of holiness, that the Holy Spirit lives with him.

We too live as a consequence of our baptism. Our baptism opened up the opportunity of a relationship between each of us, within the church into which we are baptised, and between each one of us as individuals and God.

But, like those first Christians in Samaria who were visited by Peter and John, those relationships and consequently our Christian characters, need to develop as we grow within the church and alongside others who are growing in the same way, until we become aware that there is, as part of our characters, a spirit of holiness, a holy spirit, or a desire to live in a holy way.

Reflecting on Jesus' baptism at the start of the year is a good opportunity for us to reflect at the beginning of a new year on the relationships that are part of our lives, and the way they influence who we are and how we live.

In our lives in the coming year our relationships with others will matter. As a nation our relationships with other nations are set to change. How they change and how we as nation decide what these new relationships are going to be might define who we are for many years in to the future. To what extent can these relationships be influenced by a spirit of holiness?

As individual people our relationships with other people will matter this year, as they always have. These relationships will continue to shape and define who we are, what kind of people we are, and what kind of people others are

with whom we have a relationship. To what extent can these relationships be influenced by a spirit of holiness?

Our relationship with God, too, will matter this year. Is this spiritual relationship something that we take for granted, is it one that we need to develop, how might it change who we are and how we live?

If our relationships with others represent our baptism into life - the things that shape and form us, that help to create our characters and the nature of our lives - then the Holy Spirit represents the way we seek to develop those relationships, to mark them with holiness so that we are not just relating to people, but to people who have themselves a spiritual significance, people who like us God wants life to be more than just lived, but experienced in all its fullness.