

*Fr Andrew Fenby*

So... what have you forgotten?

I'm not trying to make you anxious- it's guilt that churches do not anxiety- but I know it might, so apologies in advance. The sermon needs me to say it.

So... what have you forgotten?

When I say that, where does it take you?

Right back to the tangle of your mother's apron strings where like the dog and his treat-driven tricks you learned to say 'please' and 'thank you'? What have you forgotten? 'I've forgotten the magic word 'Please Sir, I want some more?'

However, it doesn't matter how distant your childhood years are to you know, there's no escaping 'What have you forgotten?' because no matter how much you might like to forget forgetting it dogs you all through your life.

At the very least you'll forget to plug it in, you'll forget to turn the engine on; unless you're ruthless with a diary you'll forget birthdays and anniversaries despite the copious hints your significant drop.

Yes, forgetting a birthday is a toe curling embarrassment, but no harm done in the end eh? Not like the time you're five miles down the road, and up pops that voice 'What have you forgotten? Did you lock the front door? What about the back door then? Closed all the windows? Did you forget to turn the iron off? Wasn't the oven still going when you set off? Gotcha.

Even when you're unconscious and dreaming little dreams there's no escaping that nagging worry voice- no escaping that caller because it follows you everywhere, even there into Sigmund Freud's world of adventures. What have you forgotten? You've gone out and forgotten to put your trousers on that's what. What have you forgotten? You've forgotten to write that sermon and now you're in the pulpit. What have you forgotten? You've forgotten the name of the person whose funeral you're taking haven't you? That'd be ringing a peal of recognition if you had the same dreams as me. I hope you don't.

What have you forgotten? It'll follow you to the end. Fast forward to the forgetfulness of your dotage. What have you forgotten? Erm, what's my name again?

So... what have you forgotten?

You know you've forgotten something. I'll tell you.

You've forgotten the date of your baptism. You know the date of your birthday. And various members of your family's birthdays. If they're not lodged in the grey stuff they're definitely in your diary along with an anniversary or two and perhaps a year's mind. But the day of your Christening? Unless it happened last year, you're not going to know anybody else's, that's for certain and you don't even remember when you were baptised yourself.

What have you forgotten? You've only gone and forgotten the most important day of your life.

You really shouldn't. Every year we on the first Sunday after the Epiphany we celebrate the baptism of Christ, and, least of his brothers and sisters, if it's good enough for Jesus, it's good enough for you.

Given that most of us were baptised as infants long before we even knew what a date was the day won't have lodged itself in our memory. But no excuses: when you were baptised your parents will have been given a certificate to prove it. They should have kept it and may well have passed it on to you. If you were baptised in, as the old Prayer Book had it your 'riper years' you'll have that certificate yourself. That piece of paper will tell you when. Find out the date of your baptism and make sure it comes up in your diary every year. If there's no possibility of you ever now finding out when you made your trip to the font, it doesn't matter: Do what we do for Christmas or the Queen's official birthday: pick a convenient date and use that. Note for atheists Whether December 25th was the actual date of Jesus birth or not really doesn't matter. Please stop reminding Christians every year that it probably wasn't 25/12 thinking you've won a major victory and proved our faith wrong.

So. The day you were baptised should be up there with the day of your hatching, your matching and your dispatching. It really is worth the annual reminder.

Why?

Like your birth and your death, baptism only happens to you once in your entire life. It's a moment of initiation and dedication and rebirth which should be enough to guarantee its place in your personal annals, but there's more. Above all, of all the days of your span, the day of your baptism was the day when you were gifted hope. Maybe some silverware as well. But most importantly, hope. That's some gift.

Faith, hope and love. These three abide.

We talk a lot about faith. We never stop talking about love. But the most overlooked, the littlest sister of the theological virtues is hope and in baptism she is there by the bucketful. Baptism is a lot of things, but more than anything else, it is the sacrament of hope.

The pre-eminence of hope in the font event gives us, I think, the answer to the puzzling questions today's festival of Jesus' baptism raise, above all the question: Why?

*John would have prevented him, saying, "I need to be baptised by you, and do you come to me?"*

Why do you want to be baptised John asked? So might we. Why?

Well, what does Christian teaching say? If you want to know what the Church of England believes you will usually get the amazingly pompous answer: '*lex orandi, lex credendi*', which translated means, what we pray is what we believe, i.e. look in the service book. Look there and it says:

*Our Lord Jesus Christ has told us  
that to enter the kingdom of heaven  
we must be born again of water and the Spirit,  
and has given us baptism as the sign and seal of this new birth.  
Here we are washed by the Holy Spirit and made clean.  
Here we are clothed with Christ,  
dying to sin that we may live his risen life.*

We can tell from this that if nothing else Jesus was not baptised an Anglican. Jesus is without sin, so does not need to die to it. The Spirit proceeds from him and the

Father: he has need neither to be washed by it nor made clean by it. He enters his own kingdom at will. So, for Jesus: none of the above.

But, all the symbols of baptism- rebirth, cleansing, light- are symbols of one thing: hope.

What is hope? Hope is the desire for something and the expectation of receiving it. According to Thomas Aquinas the greatest thinker of Christianity hope is "...a future good, difficult but possible to attain...by God's help." What we desire and expect as Christians is Divine union, incorporation into Christ's body, seeing God face to face.

That is what baptism promises. A truly amazing thing, difficult but possible.

Christian hope is not closing your eyes putting your fingers in your ears and singing la la la; it is not wilfully denying reality. Christian hope is knowing what your soul desires, knowing that you expect to receive it. Christian hope helps you to better refuse the lure of the false gods, their false goods, their false hopes; wealth and success, fame and fortune.

Christian hope is the refusal to give in to the despair that is written in the DNA of the world humanity has made; all in the gutter, Christians are yearning for the stars not diving into the sewer. It's hard to play a tune with only one string on your harp, but hope makes that melody ring out.

Hope then, is what baptism gives. Hope, in his baptism, is what Jesus gives.

If someone important to you is not baptised, please do not think that this means that they are without hope. Like all the sacraments, baptism reveals something that was already, is always there; makes sparkingly clear what you have never noticed before. Hope is there, baptised or not. What baptism does though is seal that hope. It's well worth it.

For those who are baptised, if you can, find out the date it happened. Mark it in some way each year, as a day of hope. Remember the hope you were given that day— that hope is yours as long as your faith holds.

Faith, hope and love; these three abide. Today, remember hope.