

A sermon by Canon Maggie Guite

Lent 3 A with Baptism 27th March 2011

Romans 5.1-11

John 4.5-15

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Jesus said to the woman by the well: *'If you knew the gift of God, and who it is that is saying to you "Give me a drink", you would have asked him, and he would have given you living water'* (John 4.10)

'If you knew the gift of God...': Baptism is all about that gift, and it's all about God's living water.

When I take Katy in my arms in a few moments, I'll pour water on her, and it will become a sign of God's gift, written into her life. It's something that can never be taken away from her; her baptism can never be undone – (however much some atheists might like to renounce the baptism they received as children). Baptism is irreversible, and it will always remain - a sign of God's gift. It might be that Katy could grow up not knowing what this sign meant – but her parents and godparents are going

to promise in a moment to do their best to help her understand about it, and I know that already Jenny and Andy sing a prayer with Katy's sister Amy every evening, and are looking for a church which will welcome them and their children in Luzern. So we can be hopeful that if Katy grows up not knowing or understanding the gift of God which her baptism is a sign of, it won't be because the people who loved her did nothing about it.

It might be that at some time in her life she'll prefer to ignore the gift of God, or even to reject it. Being baptised doesn't take away our freedom or our foolishness. But she has parents and godparents who can pray for her - and grandparents, too – praying that she won't close her eyes to God's gift for ever. What a great deal we can all do for our families and friends by keeping them in persevering prayer, which may bear fruit far into the future! It's the kind of task every Christian can take on, even when we're limited in the other things we can do for people, or when our words and the tradition of faith we've tried to pass on seem outwardly to have no influence. Never give up praying for the people you love, that their eyes

will be opened to God's gift; you may achieve far more by faithful prayer than you think!

But what *is* the gift of God, of which the water poured on Katy's head will be the sign?

When Jesus talked to the Samaritan woman by the well he called it living water; the woman seems to have misunderstood him at first, thinking he was talking about clear, running water coming from a spring near her home. Like many, many women (and children) in the world today, she was weary of trudging in the heat every day to draw water from a well, and then carry it home.

Clean running water is a great gift – we should work in this world to make it available to everyone; but Jesus wasn't talking about that. He was talking about something *within* – something gushing up to give a new quality of life – eternal life. St Paul, in our first reading, called this gift *the love of God*, poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit (Romans 5.5). That's what, in our deepest heart of hearts, we hope for; and sometimes the sufferings and stresses of life tear aside the veil and reveal very clearly to us that it what's we really most *need*

- to know we're loved unconditionally, by someone whose love won't let us down. And in the strength of that love, we can become loving, too, overcoming estrangement with others, and becoming our truest and best selves in the process.

'The love of God, poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us...' This is the gift whose sign is being written into Katy's life by her baptism. God loves her with an everlasting love. His own dearest Son has died for her to win her for him. That's is the value he puts on her – and on you and on me. She can have peace with God - reconciliation with him, whatever goes wrong in her life when she grows older and makes wrong choices: she only has to turn to him. She can have the hope of sharing his glory in this life and after death, even if things come into her life which make her feel very ashamed and inglorious. And indeed every one of us, whoever we are, or whatever situation we find ourselves in, can begin sharing in God's glory right now, whenever we're just a bit more loving in his strength than we could be in our own strength; whenever difficult times teach us to endure rather

than to moan and complain; and whenever enduring with God's love inside us and around us produces a softening or a polishing of our character, which makes us a little more like Jesus.

'If you knew the gift of God...you would ask, and be given living water'...

As a little child, it won't be hard for Katy to know the gift of God's love; she'll see it in her parents' love, and if they tell her about Jesus, and help her to pray and be part of God's people, she'll understand where love comes from. Children can catch onto these things more straightforwardly and easily than grownups sometimes can: that must be why Jesus told that learned man Nicodemus, that some of us heard about in church last week, that he needed to be born again – to start again like a child – if he was to enter the kingdom of God. Born again – of water and the spirit.

Baptism – the sign of being born again, so you can grasp God's gift as a child would. Baptism, the sign of God's gift, written permanently into your life - always there to be rediscovered, if you've lost sight of it. God's love - poured into your heart, as water

will be poured onto Katy's head – waiting to transform you like a fountain, gushing up from within, if only you'll turn again and move away any rubbish which blocks the mouth of that spring...