The baptism of Jesus is a moment when the whole life of God in Trinity is visible, present amid the crowds who push forward and the cascading water droplets.

Jesus has been one among hundreds of people flowing out from the cities to the wilderness, through the desert to the river, to John. He steps forward, in turn, and is baptised, as many others have been- but this time, as he comes up from the water and begins to pray, heaven opens and a dove physically descends on him- a dove like the one Noah sent out to see if there was anywhere dry enough to land- and a voice from heaven calls Jesus “beloved” and says that God is delighted in him.

And then the ministry of Jesus begins properly, a ministry which is launched by John but which will have a different emphasis to his, choosing to lead with welcome and freedom (rather than judgement and division) to such an extent that John will send his disciples to ask Jesus if he truly is the one John was sent to prepare the way for.

After his baptism Jesus will go from the river to the desert, to the wilderness, to isolation and temptation and a Lenten watch which will consolidate what he knows of God and of his own purpose, of the proper exercise of power, learning to embody a love which will not let us go.

A love which will not let us go, which is what we are promised in baptism and experience in the Eucharist, a love which the writer of this morning’s reading from the prophet Isaiah bears witness to. The whole book of Isaiah is three successive writings, from very different periods of Israel’s history- the first warning of a day of judgement if people don’t start to live as God calls, the third challenging people to rebuild the community and the covenant after their return, and the middle one- which today’s reading comes from- a voice of comfort and hope and courage and trust written from exile, from a strange land, when it seems as if the world has ended. 2nd Isaiah starts at chapter 40 and begins with these amazing words: “Comfort, O comfort my people, says your God. Speak tenderly to Jerusalem and cry to her that she has served her term…”

Today, in chapter 43, we hear God speaking words of tenderness and love to his people: “Do not fear, for I have redeemed you- I have called you by name you- are mine- when you pass through the waters I will be with you, and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you.” You are mine, God says, and I will not abandon you ever- whatever challenges and storms and disasters and disappointments, you are mine, and I will never let you go. God promises he will be with us always. “I have called you by name- you are mine.” That’s 1.

And 2 is that we not only belong to him but that he loves us just because we are us. Jesus comes up from the water and before he has done anything, before he has gone into the wilderness and stood up to Satan, before he has called or healed or preached or raised Lazarus from the dead, God says to him: “You are my Son, the beloved, with whom I am well pleased.” You are my beloved- not because of what you have done, or earned- but because I love you for being you.

And what God says at the baptism of Jesus he says to each of us also- I love you because you are you, the real you, the you I created, the you I see even when the world doesn’t, even when you have to hide and pretend- I love all of you, not because of your achievements or your effort but just because. Because I can. Because I do. Because you are delightful.

“I have called you by name- you are mine.” That’s 1. “You are my beloved.” That’s 2. My beloved. My delight. My joy. My precious child.

Which is what God is saying in baptism- You are mine. You are my beloved. I’ve had a very enjoyable exchange this week with Nick Hudson, the Baptist Minister and the Chair of CTW, because I am doing my first ever full-immersion baptism next week at a Church in the Deanery. I asked him for practical tips- basically, don’t run in wet socks- and his response was “Excellent. Your first real baptism. Smiley face emoji.”

Beneath the friendly teasing we can see a difference in theological emphasis around baptism between the Church of England and the Baptist Church. Believer’s baptisms are amazing and powerful things- but part of the reason I am such a fan of infant baptism is that it says: “None of this depends on you at all- God reaches out, God says you are lovely, God says he will be with you always and in everything.” In infant baptism it is all about God’s action and agency. It is not about us, or the small flame of our faith- it is about the unending water of life which is God’s free gift because we are his, beloved.

It is striking how much God works through water throughout the Bible, as if something of its dance and purity and persistence carries something of God’s heart. God separates the water from the land in creation. God floods the earth to wash away our sinfulness after telling Noah to build an ark of rescue. Moses leads the people of Israel out of Egypt through the divided Red Sea. Jonah spends three days inside the belly of a huge fish inside the sea’s depths. Paul is shipwrecked.

And Jesus calls fishermen to him, and calms the storm, and feasts on the shore of Galilee after his resurrection, only a few miles from where he was baptised by John.

Water is a means of blessing and grace. God brings order out of chaos and hope out of fear. And in baptism God captures something of all of these stories and lets them run down our foreheads like oil. Their stories, these stories, becomes ours- what Noah and Jonah and Paul and Moses and John the Baptist and Jesus Christ himself experienced is passed on to us, and it runs down our foreheads. These are our stories too, our inheritance, our bedrock, our joy and our song- because these are our people and this is our God.

Our God who, before anything, before any thing at all, takes us by the hand and looks us in the eye and says: “I have called you by name- you are mine.” That’s 1. “You are my beloved.” That’s 2. My beloved. My delight. My joy. My precious, precious child.

So feel the water running slowly down your forehead again, as welcome as a cloudburst after days of oppressive humidity, as necessary as a stream irrigating a parched land, as essential as water we cannot live without. Feel it. Let your skin remember it. It is God’s love and acceptance and delight, for you, always for you.

And then let’s get on with the job in hand, making sure that others feel the same grace on their skin and hear the same cataracts’ roar, the never-ending stream of grace, the voice which says from heaven to Jesus and to every heart- “I have called you by name- you are mine. My beloved.”