

Baptism is entry into a world free of judgment

Sermon by Andy Wurm at a baptism service, 14th October, 2018

I don't love being a father – generally speaking. I love being a father of *my children*. And I reckon for God, it's similar. I don't think God loves being God, generally speaking. I think God loves being God of *this world*, which includes us, so God loves being our God.

We may think that God would love the world more if it was better – more loving, or less sinful, but that's wrong. There is nothing the world could be that would make God love it more, because God's love is nothing to do with the nature of the world, but the nature of God.

This unconditional love of God is not easy for us to grasp, because we're socialized into relating to others in terms of whether they are like us or different to us. Much of our understanding of how we fit into the world and who we are is derived from the difference we see between ourselves and others, e.g. *I am not like those racists, I am not like those religious bigots, I am not like those intolerant people, I am not like that annoying person, I am not like that person who stuffed up. I am not like that person who broke the rules, or the code of conduct, or what is expected of people these days.* Our sense of self can be greatly strengthened by putting others down. For example, how satisfying is it when a politician you don't like stuffs up! Barnaby Joyce would have to be one of the most popular politicians in our country. Not popular in the sense of being liked, but one people like to reject. He's a wonderful scapegoat, for we can run him down, dumping our sins on him like the ancient Israelites did with goats in the wilderness. Each year they symbolically placed their sins onto the goat and ran it out into the desert, resulting in a sense of righteousness once more. With people like Barnaby, the more we find wrong with him, the more righteous we feel. And thus, we achieve a sense of being respectable, good, people. We're like the bloke praying in the temple that Jesus spoke about, who gave thanks to God for being not like the wicked tax-collector a few pews away.

There are various ways in which we justify scapegoating or rejecting others in order to create and maintain our sense of who we are and why we matter. We can justify it on the grounds that we are maintaining tradition, following rules, being a good citizen, protecting our nation, being a good team player, or just pulling our weight. So, we expel from our club the person who won't wear the uniform. We punish the one who failed to adhere to the rules. We shun those who act in an un-Australian manner. We criticize the one who thinks differently to the rest of the team. We look down upon one who isn't contributing their fair share. Or we might just reject someone for wearing different clothes to their peer group. We can reject people because they don't fit into what we consider normal for a human being, in that they are the 'wrong' or 'inferior' gender or sexual persuasion, or they are disabled or disfigured. All these categories function in the same way, which is to give power to those at the top of the hierarchy, or those who are the 'in' group, the acceptable, the righteous, the cool, the holy ones. We all know what it's like to be rejected, because we're all judged unacceptable in some category or another, leading to a sense of shame, failure or being an outcast. Personally, I don't mind being considered an outcast by Goths or heavy metal fans, but there are categories of people whose approval I want: mostly, they're people like me.

We need approval from others though, because how else do we know whether we're on the right track as human beings? No-one handed us a manual on what being a person is when we were born, so, how else do we know what being a person involves? We can only look to others for guidance. The trouble is that in seeking the approval of others, we are bound to get caught up in this power game, of ins and

outs, or normals and deviants, holy people and sinners, perfect people and those who have made mistakes.

This way of relating to one another to establish our identity is well set up to have God slotted in as the ultimate justification. While there are other ways of justifying all this, nothing compares to slotting God in as judge. When we do that, God functions like judgment Viagra. There is power in judging that to be different to everyone else is wrong, but to say *God condemns it* has greater power. Maybe we don't all buy that view, at least not consciously, but we are so used to this way of relating to one another, that it's hard to imagine that God is going to operate any differently. Isn't God against us? Doesn't God condemn us for our sin? Doesn't God at least hate the sin, but love the sinner? As if you can separate them! It's like saying God loves gays as long as they don't do anything gay. Being gay means doing gay things. Either God is part of this game, in which people are judged as acceptable or not acceptable, normal or deviant, upright or moral failures, or God is not part of this game. Jesus came to show us that God is not.

In the story of Jesus' baptism, God describes Jesus as beloved. That's biblical talk for God delighting in Jesus. That's God saying *I don't love being a father, generally speaking. I love being your father*. Which means the theological significance of referring to God as everyone's 'father' is that God delights in each one of us. This approval of the Creator does two things: one, it absolutely refutes the notion that God is in any way against us, or that God judges us like we are judged in the way of relating to one another I have been speaking about, God has no part of that. The second thing it does is remove any need for that way of treating each other, because it gives us an alternate source of the approval we need for knowing who we are and how we fit into the world.

It doesn't matter whether other people approve of you, because God does. It doesn't matter whether you have stuffed up, or whether you have broken the rules, or gone against society or the church, or whatever, because God approves of you. In fact, God delights in you.

That's a worthwhile belief, because it makes a massive difference to your life: it sets you free from needing the approval of others, or fearing their rejection, or fearing not 'fitting in'. But knowing that, are we free? Because it is really hard to break free from the way the world runs. So Jesus tells us, 'do not judge and you will not be judged'. He's not saying be nice to others so God will be nice to you. He's being practical. If you judge others, it means you are still operating in this way of relating, where people are divided into acceptable and unacceptable. And if you are operating in that way in regard to others, then you are bound by it too. You also become one judged, condemned. Hence, you can only free yourself if you also free others. In other words, only by ceasing to judge others do you stop judging yourself or making yourself into one who is judged.

The key to becoming free of the burden of fitting in to what the world says we should be, is to stop judging others. This is the freedom Jesus calls us to. Today, as I baptize Aria, I will make the sign of the cross on her forehead. As Christians, we keep that sign in front of us, as a reminder of our tendency as human beings to judge one another in order to feel good about ourselves, because that's what it ultimately leads to: a cross – i.e. killing one another, either literally or symbolically. Jesus let people kill him so we could see the judgment we let ourselves be run by and he invites us to live another way, thus realising that the One who is actually the only One who can tell us who we are and how we fit into the world, i.e. the Creator, delights in us, hoping that we might do the same.