

Sermon by Revd Jonathan Aitken
Baptism Service at St Matthew's Church of William Jr 10 September 2026

ADDRESS by REVD JONATHAN AITKEN

**For the BAPTISM SERVICE at ST MATTHEW'S CHURCH,
WESTMINSTER**

Of WILLIAM QAIS TRAVEN AITKEN

On 10th SEPTEMBER 2026

This Baptism service for William Jr — as I must learn to call him — is a gathering of great joy.

A joy which reveals itself today in deep and different forms.

First there is parental joy.

Earlier this week Laila sent me a photograph of herself and William Snr giving William Jr his first swimming lesson in the seas off Ibiza.

I don't think I have ever seen a picture of such radiant happiness on the faces of all three of them.

Next there is ancestral and family joy.

Not only are there cousins by the dozens here today
but

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I like to believe that quite a few of Laila's and William's forbears are looking down from their celestial perches rejoicing at this new recruit to the ranks of their descendants.

The Revd William Aitken mentioned in the historical note in your Order of Service was a formidable Priest and Preacher.

About 65 years ago, two of his children, my Great Aunt Gyp who was Head of the International Red Cross in World War II and

my Great Uncle Arthur – said to be the finest cancer surgeon in New York –

told me a story about a sermon by their father which has passed into preaching legend.

One Sunday in the 1870s the Revd William was at full throttle in his pulpit in Newcastle, New Brunswick.

He was preaching. as was too often his custom, on the terrors of hell!

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For the umpteenth time he warned his congregation that in hell there
would be

— wailing

and

— gnashing of teeth.

This was a repetition too far for a very elderly lady sitting in the front seat
of the congregation.

So she muttered, rebelliously, through her toothless gums:

"I have nah got any teeth"

"Madam" retorted the Revd William

"In hell teeth will be provided!"

The star of this service will in a few moments be provided with his
baptismal names.

"What's in a name?" asked Shakespeare.

Well quite a lot in today's case.

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William as you have already heard is an old family name used time and again down the generations.

From the 19th century church Bible which was used for our reading today (do come and look at it) the first entry is:

William Aitken.....baptised by meRevd William Aitken.

That was my Canadian father, Bill Aitken baptised 1903.

And the names

— William

— or Bill

— or Will

recur again and again in the family records.

For example the 1st Lord Beaverbrook was baptised William Maxwell Aitken.

I am Jonathan William Aitken.

Two more Williams,

— Senior

— and Junior,

are today adding to the surplus of William Aitkens. Enough said!

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The baby's second name **Qais** also needs a little explanation.

It was chosen by Laila for deeply romantic reasons.

In English literature perhaps the greatest love story is "*Romeo and Juliet*."

In Arabian literature the equivalent is the greatest story of Qais — and Laila.

They were a young village couple who fell in love but Qais was prevented by family rivalries from marrying Laila.

So he went away, pining and wrote some of the greatest love poetry in Arabia literature until the couple were reunited shortly before Laila's death.

So Laila, moved by

the story

and

the poetry decided to give her baby the name Qais (pronounced as in suitcase) So that explains the second name.

His third name Traven is more prosaic.

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It's an old Scottish name that was used much in and around Torphichen where the Aitken family originally hailed from.

My father, for example, was William Traven Aitken.

His name led to one amusing mispronunciation.

In later life he ended up a British Member of Parliament. On the night of his first election victory in 1950, I was there as a 9-year-old schoolboy. The Suffolk retiring officer for Bury St Edmunds announced that the duly elected Member of Parliament was

"WILLIAM TAVERN AITKEN"

This caused the defeated Labour supporters to burst into song with the old classic

"There is a Tavern in the Town"

Perhaps we'll get an encore in the Barley Mow Tavern.

I now turn to the Godparents.

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A Cecil B. DeMille sized cast of you.

Thank you for being willing to take on what is by tradition an ancient and sacred responsibility.

When I was a young adult godparent many, many years ago I used to get a little nervous at baptism services when I was asked if I repented of my sins.

But fear not!

The word *repent* may have slightly negative connotations in English church services such as
in olden times wearing sackcloth and ashes!

But the word repent has much more positive meanings theologically.

For if you go to the language in which the Gospels were originally written:
New Testament Greek.

The word for repent is

Metanoia. It literally means:

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Meta – a change;

Noia of mind

It is more richly translated as

"a change of heart and mind."

Godparents I hope and pray that today's baptism may change your

— hearts

— and minds

to the extent of making a real commitment to little William Jr.

Please try not to be an absentee or a semi-detached Godparent.

I remember, with embarrassment, in my own middle-aged life one of my most awkward moments came was when I was introduced at a cocktail party to a young woman who said:

"Jonathan Aitken! How amusing! You must be the man who sends my merchant banker husband a £5 postal order every Christmas, saying 'From your godfather!'"

Mea culpa!

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So don't be a godparent of benign neglect even when the neglect is accompanied by occasional fivers – not least because you will be missing out on so much.

Later in life I have discovered that the
Godparent – Godchild relationship can be one of life's richest and most special friendships.

Two of my godchildren are here in this church today.

One is

— James Abbott-Thompson son of Diane Abbott.

The other is

— Sharon Chawda (author, probation officer and Labour Party candidate)

who is the daughter of my beloved late wife's and now my carer Jessie Chawda.

I hope they feel, as I feel, that

— godparents

— and godchildren

who maintain good communications, as the old hymn puts it:

*Through all the changing scenes of life in
trouble and in joy*

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will discover enjoyable

— blessings

— and benefits

on both sides of the relationship.

Finally, I turn to what should be the most profound source of joy in this service – the spiritual dimension of baptism.

When we bring an infant child into the Kingdom of God we stand on Holy Ground.

And this is illustrated by two famous passages of scripture.

The first reading this morning from St Matthew's Gospel, tells the story of Jesus's baptism at which the three persons of God – The Trinity – were all present.

And that's why, following that Christian tradition, William Jr will today be baptised in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

The second and perhaps more personal scripture which has moved me in my 85th year as I conduct this service, is the story in St Luke's Gospel, of an old priest called Simeon.

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He was on duty in the Temple of Jerusalem when the parents of an unknown baby called Jesus was brought in to be presented – a sort of pre-baptism ceremony.

The old Simeon – who must have done this many times before – as he took the baby in his arms said something extraordinary:

He prayed a remarkable prayer which everyone knows as *Nunc Dimittis*:

"Lord, now lettest thou thy servant depart in peace, according to thy word"

Now of course there are no comparisons here.

I am not Simeon.

I hope I'm not going to depart in peace just yet!

And William Jr is not the Messiah!

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And yet, with the baptism of a newborn child there is a moment of hopeful expectation and holy revelation.

The only thing we might predict about William Jr is that his life, which should easily stretch into the 22nd century, will be full of surprises.

That's because both life and God are full of surprises.

I look back to my own baptism in Dublin in 1942 the darkest mid period of the Second World War. It was attended by a Queen:

—Queen Juliana of the Netherlands (my mother's best skiing friend who was a godparent);

— A Prime Minister: Éamon De Valera, Taoiseach of the Republic of Ireland.

— And a poet: John Betjeman.

Also in the congregation were a number of boisterous well-refreshed RAF pilots in uniform who had flown over from England to support my father who was the C.O of their Spitfire Squadron.

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Tensions and all, it was apparently quite a party!

But almost no-one at it would have forecast that after the 1940s most of the world would have eight decades of uncertain peace.

No one would have forecast the amazing advances in

- Science
- Technology
- Space travel
- AI
- And general prosperity
- And no one in my family would have predicted that the baby boy baptised in 1942 would in 2026 be an elderly priest presiding over the christening of his grandson.

How could all of this have taken place, even in an age of uncertainty, so happily and so joyfully.

Let's put it down to God's Grace – God's Amazing Grace.

Amen