

Baptised into Christ

The Baptism of Christ (12th January 2025) – Evensong – Canon Neil Patterson

Isaiah 55.1-11, Romans 6.1-11

At this morning's celebration of the Baptism of Christ, the Dean explored Jesus' baptism by John in the river Jordan - part of the journey from Epiphany, as Jesus reveals himself as the coming Saviour, but also a most important manifestation of the Holy Spirit. This evening's readings suggest a different emphasis, the meaning of the act of baptism itself in the life of the Church. Whether you were baptized as a baby and have no recollection of it, or as an adult and remember it well, or are not baptized but are perhaps considering it, this matters, because it is the fundamental marker of our Christian identity.

A bit on the actual readings first. The section of Isaiah comes from the beautiful later section of that prophetic book starting at Chapter 40, from which come so many familiar words interpreted in the light of Christ, not least in the libretto of Handel's *Messiah*. This section draws on the many places in Scripture where water is seen as a sign of life and hope (naturally enough in the Middle Eastern context). In the Second Temple, that is, the Temple in Jerusalem which existed after the return from Exile until Jesus' own time, an annual festival took place of bearing water from the pool at the bottom of the hill up to the Temple, celebrating the return from exile. And here 'come to the waters' opens a joyful declaration of God's abundance, who sends his word of salvation like the rain on a thirsty land.

The passage from Romans is an excerpt from Paul's complex argument about the relationship between law and grace. Having established that acts of obedience to the Jewish Law cannot in themselves bring salvation, because it depends on faith in Christ, he faces up to the paradox – should we just sin more, to be forgiven more? Of course not! But because we are united with Christ's death by baptism, we should strive to live as new people, free from enslavement to sin and turned towards God. This is among the passages of the New Testament that defines for us the place of baptism for Christians. It is much more than, as might have been thought in the days when every baby was christened, a naming ceremony, or even a simply symbolic act by those professing their Christian faith. By baptism we are made part of the great saving work of God in Christ's death and resurrection.

At this point, however, theology strikes. I imagine you have, from time to time, heard sermons on the meaning of the Eucharist, the Holy Communion. Do we receive bread and wine, or the Body and Blood of Christ? What difference does it make? And you may have

been reminded that such questions were once a matter of life and death between Christians at some periods of history. Alas, the case is somewhat the same with baptism. The Church of England, like most of the historic churches, practices infant baptism (though of course it is never too late to be baptized). Whereas some churches from the Reformation onwards have only practiced adult baptism, arguing that the candidate needs to make a conscious decision of faith.

The argument against this is important, if not simple, so bear with me. Historically it has been known as the doctrine of baptismal regeneration, that what happens in baptism, our 'spiritual regeneration,' is guaranteed by the act itself, regardless of the state of mind of the candidate. One of the major 19th-century court cases of the Church of England was fought over it, between Henry Philpotts, the combative Bishop of Exeter who believed it was an essential doctrine, and Charles Gorham, a clergyman with who disagreed strongly. Books and pamphlets were written in abundance – today it would have been a social media frenzy. After much expense the court judgment determined, underwhelmingly, that Gorham was not necessarily wrong, and so was a mild victory for Anglican broadmindedness. But such controversies, and the technical term 'baptismal regeneration' are perhaps not much more useful than transubstantiation is with the Eucharist.

More important is the idea that in baptism, what is happening is much more than a human action or decision – whether of the minister pouring the water or the person being baptized. What we believe happens at baptism, as Christians fulfil the command of Jesus to baptize all nations, is that God himself acts. By his Spirit, present at Creation and at the Eucharist as the Dean reminded us this morning, the candidate is united into the very death and resurrection of Christ. This is anything but easy to comprehend – and nor should it be. That we are brought into participation with the true meaning of the universe itself is a bold claim indeed, but anything less would be quite literally not worth the candle.

In relation to the human reality of baptism, I suggest this is in fact deeply hopeful. I was baptized as an adult, aged 18 at university, so I can remember it, if not that vividly. One of the details that does stick in mind is that as the college chapel where it happened did not have a font, we used the huge gilded alms dish that normally received the collection, held by the student sacristan known as the Bible Clerk like a sort of human pedestal. But I was certainly full of the naivety and pretension of youth, little knowing what I was getting myself into. And I would be surprised if many adults getting baptized could claim a full and sufficient knowledge of all Christian doctrine to be making a thoroughgoing conscious choice. And as well as infants, we baptize also those with severe learning difficulties, or terminally ill – because we trust God that he will welcome them into his love, not because we have decided one way or another that they were good enough.

All human language about God is limited, and from time to time we have to remind ourselves that all our descriptions are inadequate. To be sure, there are images in Scripture that make God sound like a heavenly judge deciding our worthiness, or even a sort of record-keeper checking his files like Father Christmas to see who has been naughty or nice. But those are only images to help us on the way of understanding the God who receives us in baptism. Happily, both our readings today are places where Scripture points beyond the limitations of the human language in which it is unavoidably written.

Isaiah simply says 'my thoughts are not your thoughts, or are your ways my ways.' In part this is about mercy – we might feel the natural response to Israel's sin is to send vengeance and pestilence, richly deserved – but God in fact gives mercy and grace, just as he does in baptism. But it hints at more, that the ways of God are quite other to our thinking. And this is given, to me at least, by a particular phrase in the section of Romans. Towards the beginning, Paul says "shall we continue in sin in order that grace may abound? By no means!" The phrase translated 'by no means' is an expression of which Paul was fond, as you may recognise.

To be technical for a moment - the Greek for this is $\mu\eta\ \gamma\epsilon\nu\omicron\iota\tau\omicron$ (mē genoito), the strong negative $\mu\eta$ and what excited Greek students learn is an the grammatical voice called the optative, $\gamma\epsilon\nu\omicron\iota\tau\omicron$, meaning 'let it be so.' It's in the phrase Mary uses in response to Gabriel 'let it be so to me according to your word.' So literally, 'let it not be so!' or we might just say more idiomatically 'that's nonsense!' But it is used so abruptly in this and other passages that is almost an oath, and this is why, I think, the old Authorised Version renders it 'God forbid!' That is absolutely not what the Greek says, which makes no direct reference to God at all, and yes, they were translating the same phrase.

But they were onto something, those old translators. Everything that is, is because God lets it be so - being the guarantee of existence itself. The hairs of your head, the thoughts of your heart, the stones of this Cathedral, the sunset over the Harbour and the limitless stars of space, none would be so without God. And what is not so, he has made not so. And the mystery and wonder we celebrate today is that not only did the God of all things become one of us in Jesus and die and rise again for us, but that in baptism he makes us each individually a part of that great and eternal redeeming work.