

MATTHEW 3:13-end BAPTISM OF CHRIST

12 January 2020, Family Service CCO & StJN

Father, take these words and speak to our hearts through them, for your Name's sake. Amen.

I spoke last week about how Matthew is always showing us that Jesus is the fulfilment of the Old Testament, that he is the one the Jewish people had been waiting for for so long, the one who would make the promises of God come true. We see this again with the baptism of Jesus.

John the Baptist chose the banks of the River Jordan as the place for baptism. This was the very place where the Israelites had entered the Promised Land all those centuries before. That was supposed to mark the start of a new era of God's rule. The people being baptised by John would understand that. Their baptism, going down into the waters of the River Jordan and coming up out again, clearly symbolised the beginning of a new life.

We are told that as Jesus comes up out of the water, the Spirit of God descends on him in bodily form, like a dove. John has been preaching of judgement. Now the dove speaks of peace, peace and reconciliation between humankind and God.

You will remember that Noah sent out a dove that returned with the olive branch showing that the floodwaters had subsided, and that all was now well between God and man. The dove was the symbol of a new beginning, a sign of the renewed covenant between God and the people.

Why was Jesus baptised? He comes as a grown man to be baptised by John. But as a baby, in accordance with Jewish law, he had been circumcised, 8 days after his birth. Circumcision was a sign of the Old Covenant. It was a ritual showing that Jesus was now a member of the people of Israel, even though he could not make that profession of faith for himself. He had no choice in the matter, and

might have preferred not to go through it! But his family brought him so that he would be sure of his identity, so that he would grow up knowing where he belonged – that he belonged to God! It was like God's mark of ownership on him.

St Paul speaks at some length about those who have been circumcised in the body but who are not circumcised in their heart, i.e. they have the outward sign of belonging to God, but their hearts are far away from Him. In Romans (2:25-29) he writes:

'If you obey the Law, your circumcision is of value; but if you disobey the Law, you might as well never have been circumcised. If the Gentile, who is not circumcised, obeys the commands of the Law, will not God regard him as though he were circumcised? And so you Jews will be condemned by the Gentiles because you break the Law, even though you have it written down and are circumcised; but they obey the Law, even though they are not physically circumcised. After all, who is a real Jew, truly circumcised? It is not the man who is a Jew on the outside, whose circumcision is a physical thing. Rather, the real Jew is the person who is a Jew on the inside, that is, whose heart has been circumcised, and this is the work of God's Spirit, not of the written Law. Such a person receives praise from God, not from human beings.'

I wonder if we should take his words about Jewish circumcision and apply them to Christian baptism?

The baby Jesus has now grown up, and he knows he has God's work to do. Why does he come to be baptised? John is taken aback – it should be YOU baptising ME, he says. But Jesus insists that he too must receive baptism at the hands of John. It's not that Jesus' sins need to be washed away, but by being baptised, like everyone else who was seeking a new life following the commands of God, Jesus is identifying himself with us, with us ordinary human beings who know that we stand in need of the love and grace of God the Father.

Jesus, the Son of God, is born like we are, a tiny helpless baby. He shares family life as he grows up, as we do. And when he is grown up, he chooses to show that he belongs to God, by being baptised, as other people are.

Jesus shares our humanity, right from the start, and he shares it right through to the end, when he dies. And it is because he has shared all that with us, that we can trust that he will also share with us the new life God gives him after death.

And it is as Jesus identifies himself with us, in humbly coming to John to be baptised alongside all the other sinners, as he identifies with broken, suffering humanity, it is at that moment that God identifies Jesus as his beloved Son, and the Holy Spirit is seen to descend on him. This baptism marks the beginning of Jesus' ministry, of his journey through teaching, healing, rejection, adulation, suffering, death and resurrection. It demonstrates, publicly, his offering of himself to live for God, and God's commissioning of his work among humankind.

And that, of course, is just what baptism should mean for all of us: a public demonstration of our faith and our commitment to the way of Jesus, sealed by God's Holy Spirit. We go down into the waters to symbolise our being washed clean from all that spoils the image of God in us, and our dying to the old way of life; we then rise up from the waters, as Jesus rose from the dead to new life, cleansed and equipped with the power of the Holy Spirit to live our lives for Christ.

When baptism is by full immersion, or complete dunking in a font, that symbolism of dying and rising is very powerful. In our cold climate, we have rather modified the process and reduced it to a simple washing of the head. This is a shame in some ways, but practical at least! The symbolism is the same, but not as powerfully demonstrated.

Now, if baptism is the start of the Christian life, signifying a dying and rising with Christ, a cleansing from sin, a receiving of the life-giving

Holy Spirit, a welcoming into God's new society of love, and the start of a faith journey toward God's coming renewal of all things, what sense does it make to baptise infants? Why do we baptise babies and children, who cannot make that decision for themselves? As we know, several Christian denominations only baptise adults, but there is a long history of Christians bringing their little ones for baptism, I imagine much in the same way as the Jewish converts had brought their babies for circumcision. We read in Acts of whole households being baptised: new believers rejoiced in the new life offered by God, and clearly saw no reason why their children should be left out!

The problem arose as the meaning of baptism came to be distorted. I'm sure you will have come across people who thought that if a baby died without being baptised it would go to hell! What sort of God did they believe in? And then there is the problem of baptism being seen as the end, rather than just the beginning. And of it being a private family matter. Even today there are people who want a private christening, with none of the usual church congregation present. This makes rather a mockery of one of the key features of baptism, which is that it marks the incorporation of the new Christian into the Body of Christ, the Church. Welcomed into the covenant community by baptism, we are no longer solitary individuals, but instead members of a new family and citizens of a new society, a society in which there is neither Jew nor Greek, neither slave nor free, neither male nor female, as Paul wrote.

Whether it be of an adult or child, baptism affirms primarily that we are recipients of the gift of God's love and are claimed for God's service. We are recipients of something that is done *FOR* us. Adult baptism gives greater play to the conscious and free response of a person to God's forgiving love in Jesus Christ. It stresses explicit public confession and personal commitment to the way of Christ. But it may also tend toward a view of faith as *preceding* rather than *responding to* God's initiative. And it may put such stress on the individual that the importance of the *community* in the process of one's growth in faith and Christ discipleship is neglected.

We may note that in traditions that baptise adults only, there is often a dedication and commitment service for infants and their parents, which shows the need for some public recognition of the responsibility of the whole church community for nurturing children in the life of faith.

Infant baptism demonstrates that even when they are helpless, human beings are loved and affirmed by God. Simply, it proclaims that ‘God loves this child.’ It expresses God’s loving reception of the child into a covenant community that takes responsibility for helping this child to mature in faith. It makes clear that baptism is a beginning of the process of growing into Christ, and that this process of growth cannot take place without a supportive community of faith.

But baptism and faith can not be separated. Baptism *calls* for the free personal response of the person baptised, at some point. In the Anglican Church, this is the role of Confirmation. God is patient. He gives children who have been baptised time to come of age to stand on their own feet, and respond freely and gladly to the call to discipleship already at work in their lives. In the meantime, there is a faith that is already responding to the enacted grace of God in the baptism of the infant. It is the faith of the parents, godparents and the community in whose midst the child is baptised. While their faith cannot be a substitute for that of the child, it can help prepare the way for the child’s eventual free response to her or his baptism. Parents, Godparents and congregation vow to provide a Christian environment for their children until the day when they are ready to speak for themselves.

So there is a big responsibility for all of us, as parents, Godparents and members of the church congregation to do all we can to nurture the faith of the youngsters who are baptised into our fellowship. And it would be good if, as a congregation, we could find ways of helping parents who have brought their children for baptism to fulfil their vows.

Prayer and Action

Father, we ask you to bless this water. As we use it to make the sign of your cross on ourselves, may we renew our commitment to follow you, and may we be empowered and equipped once more with your Holy Spirit, to love and to serve you always. Amen.

CCO questions:

If you are a parent, Godparent or older sibling (big brother or sister) of someone who has been baptised, what do you remember about the service? What, if anything, struck you as important?

Why Baptism?

Sacrament: outward visible sign of an inward spiritual grace, i.e. we do something that everyone can see which tells us that something important is happening inside where we cannot see.

In the baptism service, a person states their faith in Jesus Christ as their Lord and Saviour, and promises to follow his way. Baptism is a public demonstration of our faith and our commitment to the way of Jesus, sealed by God’s Holy Spirit. We go down into the waters to symbolise our being washed clean from all that spoils the image of God in us, and our dying to the old way of life; we then rise up from the waters, as Jesus rose from the dead to new life, cleansed and now equipped with the power of the Holy Spirit to live our lives for Christ.

When baptism is by full immersion, or complete dunking in a font, that symbolism of dying and rising is very powerful. In our cold climate, we have rather modified the process and reduced it to a simple washing of the head. This is a shame in some ways, but practical at least! The symbolism is the same, but not as powerfully demonstrated.

Judith and/or Caleb to talk about their adult baptism?

Many people think that we shouldn't baptise babies or little children as they are too young to 'make up their own mind' about God and faith and Christianity. What do you think, and why?

So why do we baptise babies?

New Testament witness: whole households being baptised. Why would they leave the children out??

Unfortunately, as time went on, the meaning of baptism came to be distorted. I'm sure you will have come across people who thought that if a baby died without being baptised it would go to hell! What sort of God did they believe in? And then there is the problem of baptism being seen as the end, rather than just the beginning. And of it being a private family matter. Even today there are people who want a private christening, with none of the usual church congregation present.

Why is it important that we baptise children during a Family Service?

One of the key features of baptism is that it marks the incorporation of the new Christian into the Body of Christ, the Church. A bit like when you join the Brownies: you have to prepare, to learn your promise and what it means to be a Brownie, and then you go through a special little ceremony to mark the fact that you are becoming a member of the Brownie Pack. In a similar way, when we are welcomed into the faith community by baptism, we become members of a new family and citizens of a new society. Imagine joining the Brownies and then never going to another Brownie meeting. Or going through the joining ceremony in a room by yourself with just a leader and no other Brownies there! I'm sure you'd think that was very odd!

Now, Brownies, can make their promises for themselves, but babies can't make the baptism promises themselves.

Let's have a look at the promises in the Baptism service sheets.

Baptism of children shows us first of all that God loves this child, freely, without conditions.

But clearly Baptism and Faith cannot be separated. Baptism *calls* for the free personal response of the person baptised, *at some point*. In the Anglican Church, this is the role of Confirmation. God is patient. He gives children who have been baptised time to come of age to stand on their own feet, and respond freely and gladly to the call to discipleship already at work in their lives, through the power of the Holy Spirit, who doesn't have to wait for us to grow up before he can get to work in us!

And while the child is growing up, there is a faith that is already responding to the enacted grace of God in the baptism of the infant. It is the faith of the parents, godparents and the community in whose midst the child is baptised. While their faith cannot be a substitute for that of the child, it can help prepare the way for the child's eventual free response to her or his baptism. Parents, Godparents and congregation vow to provide a Christian environment for their children until the day when they are ready to speak for themselves.

Are Godparents important? Why?

If you are a Godparent, what do you do for your Godchild?

Have you ever been able to talk about faith with the parents? With your Godchild?

How, as a church, can we help parents and Godparents who bring children to this church to be baptised?

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