The Baptism of Christ 2022

Acts 8:14-17

Luke 3:15-17,21-22

I thought that I would start this morning by conducting a brief survey amongst those of us here in church. If you don’t want to take part, there’s no pressure. I am going to read out four statements, and I would just like you to put up your hand when I read out the one which applies to you. Here goes:

Statement one – I was baptised as a baby

Statement two – I was baptised as an adult

Statement three – I have not been baptised

Statement four – I don’t know if I have been baptised or not

Interesting

The responses are pretty much as I expected: that most of us here are baptised – and most of us here were baptised as a baby.

Let me ask you another question. This time, I am not expecting a response. Just something for you to think about as I speak, and for you to reflect on in the days to come.

What does baptism mean to you? What difference does it make to you that you are baptised?

Our two readings this morning both focus on baptism, but the baptisms to which they refer are actually quite different.

Our reading from Luke refers to the baptism of God’s people by John the Baptist, before Jesus’ ministry, and of course to the baptism of Jesus himself.

At the time of Jesus, baptism was not an official part of Judaism, and you cannot find the word baptism anywhere in the Old Testament, but it was practised unofficially by some Jewish people in the century before and after Jesus' birth. It was seen as a simple sign of general repentance, and as such could be repeated. Around the same time, ritual baths for purification became more common among Jews in urban areas, and, if you go to the Jewish quarter of the Old City of Jerusalem today, you can see houses with ritual baths dating back almost 20 centuries. This is the context for the baptism of God’s people by John the Baptist in this passage.

Jesus, of course, as God’s son, is sinless, and there is no need for him to repent, or to receive forgiveness, in the way that the people do. In Matthew’s account of the baptism, in fact, John tries to refuse to baptise him saying that it is he, John, who should instead be baptised by Jesus. It is however important for Jesus to be baptised, so that he can become like one of us – Emmanuel – God with us. It is a symbol of his great humility, and he sets an example for his followers. His baptism is also an opportunity for God to show Jesus’ divine authority with the words: *You are my Son, the beloved; with you I am well pleased.*

Our reading from Acts on the other hand refers to the baptism of new believers by the apostles in the early church.

It has been a very difficult time for Christian believers. One of their leaders, Stephen, has been stoned to death by the mob whilst preaching the gospel. This has been followed by severe persecution against the church in Jerusalem, and most of the church members have fled to the countryside of Judea and Samaria. However, finding themselves amongst people who have not heard the gospel, they take the opportunity to talk about Jesus, and many come to faith. The tragedy of the death of Stephen has therefore in fact been the catalyst for the spread of the message in the wider community.

Slightly earlier in this chapter, we are told that the people have believed, and *are baptised,* by Philip, *both men and women*. Then, here in verse 14, we are told that Peter and John go down and *pray for them that they might receive the Holy Spirit*, and then they lay their hands on them. This seems to suggest that the way in which Philip was baptising people was only a first step, and the new believers also needed the laying on of hands by the apostles as a final step in coming to faith.

These are controversial verses, because no-one is really quite sure what they actually mean. There are lots of different explanations, and, if you want to look into this further, I can point you in the right direction. I usually try specifically to disentangle the tricky verses in a Bible reading, but, this morning, it’s not a discussion which I want to get bogged down in, because I want to concentrate instead on what baptism means to us.

So what does baptism mean to you?

When I talk to parents who have asked me to baptise their child, I ask them this very question. They tell me that it is a chance to give thanks for the safe arrival of their baby, and a chance to celebrate with friends and family. They also however have the feeling that it is something which they need to do for their child. This is partly because it is seen as a traditional rite of passage, but it is more than this, I think. A new baby is a miraculous gift, which gives them a sense of wonder and awe, and sets them thinking more deeply about life and creation, and about God.

And within the Christian church itself there are a range of possible answers to this question. A range which is probably represented here in church this morning, in terms of your own experience, and what you believe.

Most Christians would agree that baptism is a sacrament. That is to say an outward and visible sign of an inward and invisible grace – a sign of God’s unconditional love at work in and through us. Most Christians would also agree that the Holy Spirit is at work in the lives of those who are baptised. The Holy Spirit of course plays a part in the accounts of baptism in both our Bible readings too.

There is less agreement however on the role of the sacrament of baptism in our lives. Does the baptism bring with it forgiveness of sins, or does it simply signify that forgiveness has already taken place? Putting it another way, is baptism as an essential act, a saving act, through which a person becomes a Christian, and is put right with God? And without which a person is not a Christian? Or is it an important, but non-essential act, which is merely **symbolic** of what **is** essential, that is the sincere belief and commitment in the heart, the soul and the mind of the person, which puts that person right with God, and makes them a Christian?

I asked you at the beginning if you were baptised as a baby or as an adult.

If you were baptised as a baby, it would have been in a church tradition which believes that it is the sacrament of baptism which brings us into a relationship with God. That church therefore practises baptism for children who are unable themselves to make a personal commitment, but whose parents are able to do so on their behalf. Within this tradition, a baby which is very ill would be baptised as a matter of urgency, often in hospital. In the Roman Catholic church and most of the Anglican church for example infant baptism is the norm.

If you were baptised as adult, it would either have been because you had just become a Christian, or because you were part of a church tradition which believes that baptism is symbolic of a faith commitment in the heart, the soul and the mind of the person. That church therefore only practises baptism for people who are old enough to believe and make a personal commitment, that is adults and older children. A believer’s baptism, as it is known, takes in place in Baptist and Pentecostal churches, and some Anglican churches, and it of course follows the example of what happened in the early church, as our reading from Acts reminds us.

So, as I asked you earlier, what does baptism mean to you? What difference does it make to you that you are baptised?

Clearly only you can answer that question.

And let me say at this point that, if there is anyone here who has not been baptised, and would like to be, please do speak to one of us this morning, and we would very pleased to talk to you about it.

For now, let me share with you three images which come to mind for me – amongst many possible images - around what baptism means to me, and what difference it makes to me.

When I was at school, I had a friend called Rebecca, who was a Baptist, and she invited me to attend her baptism. It was something I will never forget. She was baptised by total immersion in a long white dress. Just before she was baptised, she gave her testimony, speaking passionately about the difference which being a Christian made in her life, and, after each person was baptised, and climbed back out of the pool, we all sang the chorus of that wonderful Easter hymn “Low in the grave he lay” (which we will sing in a few minutes)

*Up from the grave He arose
With a mighty triumph o'er His foes
He arose a Victor from the dark domain
And He lives forever with His saints to reign
He arose! (He arose)
He arose! (He arose)
Hallelujah! Christ arose!*

It was so different from anything I had seen in the churches I normally attended. I was blown away by the power of the symbolism, and by the sincerity of the testimonies of those who were baptised. This was believer’s baptism at its best.

I trained for ordination alongside another Rebecca. Becky had never been baptised, as a baby or as an adult, and, you have to be baptised in order to be ordained. During our four years of training, the group of ordinands had become very close-knit and supportive, and so it was a wonderful moment on Maundy Thursday 2014 at our Easter School when Becky was baptised from amongst us.

And finally – my own baptism. For me it has always been something which I feel connects me with people. It connects me with people all over the world, and with people going back in time.

I was baptised as a baby in the Methodist Church. When I came to be ordained, I found that, although my mother had kept all my certificates, including my one for swimming a width, she hadn’t for some reason kept my baptism certificate, and I needed it. I contacted the current minister at the church in south east London where I was baptised, and I received a lovely covering letter back. The minister said that there were still people there who remembered my parents, and who sent me their good wishes.

I was baptised in this beautiful silk christening robe, which was made by hand by my maternal grandmother. My mother was baptised in it, as was my sister, and our two sons. I myself baptised my two granddaughters, but sadly, with them living abroad, they had grown too big to fit into it by the time we were able to arrange the baptism.

My baptism connects me then with those who have gone before me, but it is also very precious because it connects me with Christians from other traditions and other parts of the world. Despite all the differences between different traditions in the Christian church, we all recognise each other’s baptisms. We all recognise baptism as the invisible indelible mark that someone is a Christian.

I leave you with these powerful words from the Common Worship baptism service.

As the minister makes the sign of the cross on the person’s forehead, he or she says

*Christ claims you for his own*

*Receive the sign of his cross*

And then

*Do not be ashamed to confess the faith of Christ crucified*

To which we all add

*Fight valiantly as a disciple of Christ*

*Against sin, the world and the devil*

*And remain faithful to Christ to the end of your life*

Go home today with those words ringing in your ears.

Be encouraged by them.

Be challenged by them.

Amen