

Sermon for Evensong on the 11th Sunday after Trinity, 1st
September 2019 - Christening
(Isaiah 33:13-22): John 3:22-36 - see
<http://bible.oremus.org/?ql=434112265>

*22After these things came Jesus and his disciples into the land of Judaea;
and there he tarried with them, and baptized.*

*23And John also was baptizing in Aenon near to Salim, because there was
much water there: and they came, and were baptized.*

Being baptised is something that we sort-of know about; but then again, perhaps we don't really. So I thought I'd spend a few minutes looking at it more closely.

One of the nice things that we do, here at St Mary's, is to baptise children - and, occasionally, adults too - in our morning Eucharist service. Indeed we have a special service booklet for 'The Eucharist with Baptism'.

Clearly things have moved on quite a lot from the time when John the Baptist and Jesus and his disciples were baptising in the River Jordan. There was no genteelly hanging a more or less docile infant over a font and decorously splashing a little water over his or her forehead. This was full immersion in the river, for which purpose John needed a certain minimum depth in order to be able to dunk those to be baptised.

We read that John was 'was baptizing in Aenon near to Salim, because there was much water there'. Today the river Jordan is just a trickle in places, and even then, 2000 years ago, they needed to find a place where the river was deep enough to dunk people completely in it.

That is indeed what the Greek verb βαπτίζειν, from which we get our word 'baptise', means: it means to dip, to dunk. So what the Baptists do today, and what Archbishop John Sentamu seems to do on cold wet days at York Minster also, is more true to historical precedent than the normal font job that we are more used to.

Revd Renos Pittarides, now Rector of East Horsley, did baptise a very keen 10-year-old in the River Mole by the bridge at the corner of the Tilt a few years ago, which was a joyful occasion, although I think it must've been very cold.

So what is baptism? And by the way, the first thing to clarify is how to spell it. You will see that in the bibles that we use 'baptise' is spelt with a Z, which you might have thought was an Americanism. It is a Greek word. Βαπτίζω is the same word - baptise, which we still use, not just to connote immersion but immersion for a Christian purpose, as part of Christian initiation, initiation into the Christian family, the church. 'Baptism', however, has an S, both in Greek and in English. The verb, to baptise, can be spelled in English either with a Z or with an S. I think that we should use S rather than Z throughout, because the Greek letter which is transliterated as Z is not said as Z but as DZ, so it's not 'baptizzein' but it's 'baptidzein'. Although we're not absolutely sure how the Ancient Greek sounded, modern scholars usually say that the letter Zeta was pronounced with a labial stop: it's got a D or a T in it as well as Z, rather like some German words. Churchill always said 'Nartzie' instead of 'Nartzie'. He was doing it on purpose to annoy Germans, who pronounce Z as though it was preceded by a T, so they say 'Nartzie'. Similarly with 'baptise'. In Greek it's 'baptidzo'; so it isn't really the same as a Z.

So what is going on in a baptism? The question applies whether it is in the river or whether it is in the font. It's clearly not simply a question of having a wash. Indeed, if you remember, Jesus had a disagreement with the Pharisees about washing your hands before having something to eat. The Pharisees took him to task. You will find this in Saint Matthew's Gospel, chapter 15. The Pharisees took him to task because, they said, your disciples don't wash their hands when they eat their bread.

Jesus stoutly defended their right to eat their food with dirty hands, because, he said, a man is not defiled by what goes into his mouth but only by what comes out of it. This is a story which all mothers of grubby little boys would rather their children did not read in Sunday

school. The spiritual significance of not washing your hands is rather lost on the average 10-year-old boy, but these days we would say that, whatever the spiritual pros and cons, there is an undoubted health risk in not washing your hands before you eat.

I think it might be argued that Jesus was rather too hard on the Pharisees here. The Jewish law about washing before eating, like a lot of the rest of the Jewish law, is actually grounded in the need to avoid the spread of diseases and common sense quite apart from any spiritual dimension to it. But the Jews undoubtedly had a rite of purification; there was a spiritual sense in which they used water in a sacramental way to signify a spiritual purification, a washing away of sin and evil.

In Ezekiel ch 36, just before the great passage about the dry bones, there is prophecy about water, 'I will sprinkle clean water on you and you shall be clean; from all your filthiness and from all your idols will I cleanse you'. (Ezekiel 36:25) so what John the Baptist was doing followed the Jewish rite of purification, symbolically washing away those things which separated the chosen people from the One True God.

Christian baptism, on the other hand, has that Jewish meaning of spiritual purification, but also there is the idea which comes in Saint Paul's letter to the Romans, ch 6, that baptism is a symbolic way of dying, being drowned, and then being resurrected by coming up out of the water - and that therefore we are symbolically, sacramentally, entering into Christ's own death and resurrection. We are becoming sacramentally resurrected, reborn spiritually, as Christians.

John the Baptist was preaching baptism as a token of repentance, leading to the forgiveness of sins, whereas Jesus used baptism to signify the coming of the Holy Spirit. At Pentecost the tongues of flame were the sign that the Spirit had come on the believers: but afterwards they were baptised as well.

Baptism is a sacrament, what is called an 'outward and visible sign' of an 'inward spiritual grace', and in Jesus' final instructions to his disciples, according to the last few verses of St Matthew's Gospel,

he commands them to 'Go ... and teach all nations, baptising them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost'. There is a sense of purification, washing away sinfulness, but it is also very much a question of initiation into the church, into the family of Christ. The other name for baptism that we use, christening, seems to me to be rather good in this sense, because it has that connotation of bringing someone into Christianity, christening them.

Well again, I think you will start to have a feeling, at the back of your minds at least, that this is all very nice, but pretty theoretical - and perhaps not terribly reminiscent of what actually goes on in christening services today.

At its most basic, people think of baptisms, of christenings, really as a posh way of naming their children. Really the only Christian dimension to it is the fact that it happens in church. But perhaps the church dimension is understood really only as making the whole thing more solemn, more special, without there being any particular theological underpinning, along the lines which I have been discussing.

Sometimes I've noticed that when the godparents come to the bit where they hear that the church expects them to help to bring up the little one concerned in the faith, and to bring him or her eventually to be confirmed, they are a bit surprised; they had thought it was just a matter of remembering their godchild's birthdays and Christmas in order to give them presents, and they probably hadn't bargained on having religious duties too.

But just giving presents is not strictly all that is intended. The name 'God'parent has significance here. The idea is that they are Christian sponsors. But let's not be too hard on ourselves here. Christenings are joyful occasions, and I think that they do bring people to the church or back to the church, bringing families back in when they find that there is a warm and welcoming community here. It is lovely to see young families coming to St Mary's. The last little girl to be christened was somebody who, with her brothers and sisters, had been brought by their Mum to our 'Mothers and Others'

sessions in St Mary's Hall; then christening brought them into the church, and they are now part of our regular worshipping community.

There's a small elephant in the room, perhaps for further discussion, which is, to what extent it's really appropriate to baptise little ones, infants who are not yet able to make the professions of faith by themselves. Certainly at the time of the Reformation there was a strong strand of resistance to infant baptism, and you can see a trace of it in the Articles of Religion at the back of your Prayer Books. Article XXVII on p.622 is about baptism, and it's a handy reminder of what baptism is for and what it signifies. Intriguingly at the end, it has this sentence: 'The baptism of young children is in any wise to be retained in the church, as most agreeable with the institution of Christ'. It must have been an issue even then, around 1549, when Cranmer first published the Book of Common Prayer.

The 'institution of Christ' is a reference to St Mark's Gospel, chapter 10, where Jesus said, 'Suffer the little children to come unto me'. Jesus welcomed children, even when the disciples were shooing them away, because they thought the kids might be a nuisance. Again, that's something that we try to remember at St Mary's. One of the first things that Godfrey said when he came was that, if anybody's children are making a noise, and any grownups try to shush them, he'd be inclined to eject the grownups rather than the children.

So let's have lots more christenings. Maybe people may not get the finer points, but it's a great way - the only proper way - to bring people into our church family.

Amen.

Hugh Bryant