

The First Sunday after the Epiphany – The Baptism of Christ

10/1/16

“Jesus, John and our Baptism ...”

I speak in the name of Jesus the Christ, in the power of the Holy Spirit, to the glory of God the Father.

Amen.

Studying theology at a university level is no easy task. Many of us are brought up in Sunday School at a local parish during our formative years and depending on the quality of the Rector’s preaching, we land up with a Sunday School interpretation of theology... the problem is that many of us end up going through life with this construct in our minds. I would be so bold as to suggest that perhaps this is one of the main reasons that the mainline church is currently finding itself in a negative growth curve - because people today are generally informed and educated and are unable to accept a social construct based on a Sunday School level of theology...

The challenge is that when you go to university to study Divinity and the related subjects, the academic jump from your Sunday School social construct to understanding and comprehending the Historico-Critical method as taught by most leading universities, essentially creates a crisis of faith for the student. Everything that you have been taught and believe is broken down and slowly rebuilt into a new social construct that is informed and academically correct. The problem is that, many Divinity students are unable to cope with this change. It is traumatic. I watched a student at Rhodes, who by the way is my best friend today, go through this academic crisis of faith. Thomas (not his real name) managed to pass his first year in the BTh programme, but was so traumatised by the journey that he resigned from the Methodist ministry and changed his degree to education. Interestingly, today he has a very successful ministry in Scripture Union working with children - my point being that he still acknowledged his calling to the ministry - in his own way.

In my first year, I soon found myself in the same situation. I was a Presbyterian student for the ministry studying towards the Bachelor of Theology degree at Rhodes University. I soon felt alienated, lost and wondering where I belonged.

The local Presbyterian Church, where I was expected to worship and take a leading role, suddenly seemed to lose its appeal as I struggled with rebuilding my social construct and understanding of the Christian faith.

At the same time, however, I had developed a very special relationship with my Professor of New Testament studies. From the moment that I had met Professor John Suggit, I knew immediately that this humble man would have an enormous influence over my life for many years to come - and indeed, this has been the case. John and I are still in touch to this very day, thirty-one years later. He presided over my marriage and baptised my daughter, Shannon.

It seemed natural then, for me, to go along and see where Prof Suggit worshipped in Grahamstown. So, all alone, one Sunday evening, I walked down to the Cathedral in Grahamstown and in one fell swoop, was introduced to the beauty of Anglican worship, the emphasis on the sacraments, chanting the Gospel and all the smells and bells that go with traditional worship...

I was home.

I never left.

My point is that as Anglicans, we sometimes tend to take the gift and focus of the sacraments for granted. For we are a sacramentally based church- we must never forget that. It is our strength and privilege as Anglicans. We must cherish every single sacrament that we have been given through faith.

Including baptism.

Today the Anglican Church celebrates and acknowledges the baptism of Jesus by John the Baptist.

You may recall last year that I spent some time preaching and explaining the sacrament of the Eucharist.

Today I would like to take a moment and spend some time relooking at the sacrament of Baptism. I think it is important that we renew and refresh our understanding of this sacrament, for just as the Eucharist is central and fundamental to our Christian faith and journey, so too is our understanding of Baptism and the role it plays in our personal life of faith, both as individuals and in the community of faith that we live and worship.

So, let's take a closer look at Baptism...

We need to understand and appreciate from the outset that Christian Baptism is rooted in the ministry of Jesus of Nazareth, in his death and in his resurrection. It is essentially incorporation into Christ, who is the crucified and risen Lord; it is entry into the New Covenant between God and God's people. Therefore we can claim Baptism to be a gift from God, and is administered in the name of the Father, Son and the Holy Spirit.

So, what does Baptism mean?

Our baptism is the sign of new life through Jesus Christ. When we are baptised we are partaking in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Through our baptism we are liberated, or set free, of our sins. The "old Adam" is crucified with Christ and the power of sin is broken. Thus, when we are baptised, we are no longer slaves to our sin, but set free.

Therefore it can be said that when we are baptised, we are pardoned, cleansed and sanctified by Christ. We are given a new orientation under the guidance of the Holy Spirit.

This brings me to the next point...

God bestows upon all baptised people the anointing and the promise of the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit nurtures the life of faith in our hearts.

Baptism is also the sign and seal of our common discipleship. Through Baptism, Christians are brought into union with Christ, with each other and the church of every time and place. Thus our baptism is a basic bond of unity. We are one people and are called to confess and serve one Lord in each place and in all the world.

This statement, if correctly stated and believed, has enormous implication for church unity and is an issue that needs to be further explored.

Baptism is also a sign of the Kingdom of God and the life of the world to come.

Therefore it could be said that Baptism is both God's gift and our human response to that gift. Baptism requires a personal commitment from every one

of us. It is not a sacrament to be taken lightly or flippantly, but rather in a way that engages our very soul and heart. It is life- our life in Christ.

Lastly, Baptism also implies growth. It is not merely a momentary experience in time, but a commitment to life-long growth in Christ. Our life as Christians may indeed be one of continual struggle, but it is also one of continual grace- through our baptism. As a baptised community we have a responsibility and obligation to continue to shine the light of Christ as we share the Gospel in all that we do and say.

In conclusion we need to understand that all baptism is rooted in and declares Christ's faithfulness unto death. It has its setting within the life of the church and through the witness of the whole church, points to the faithfulness of God. At every baptism the whole congregation reaffirms its faith in God and recommits to being a parish of faith, witness and service. Baptism is always celebrated in the setting of a Christian community.

So, what should our response be this morning?

If you have already been baptised, take some time this morning to reflect upon that special day and to give thanks to God for being faithful to you during your life. Perhaps light a candle after the Eucharist as a symbol of your rededicating your life to Christ in full acknowledgement of your baptism.

If you have not yet been baptised then consider prayerfully the possibility of being baptised in the coming future. Make an appointment with one of the priests to explore this option. Perhaps make it a New Year's resolution?

If you are the parent or guardian of a baptised child, perhaps this is a good time to recommit your dedication to bringing up this child in a Christian home with Christian values. As the adult, you made the vows. Are you keeping them to the best of your ability?

Lastly, as Christians within the Anglican Community, I believe we need to cherish and uphold the beauty and relevance of all seven of our sacraments, not only Baptism and the Eucharist. They are all important and they all play a vital role in our daily walk with Christ.

I am reminded once again of the beautiful words written in Luke Ch 3:21...

“When all the people were being baptised, Jesus was baptised too. And as he was praying, heaven was opened and the Holy Spirit descended on him in bodily form like a dove. And a voice came from heaven: ‘You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased.’”

Are you fully appreciative of the blessing and power that your baptism has had on your life and walk of faith?

May God bless you this week ahead as you recommit yourself to the vows of your baptism in Christ Jesus.

Amen.