

13 January 2019

Epiphany I

St Luke 3

Today, as we begin this season of Epiphany which will continue until the last Sunday in February, we begin, as always, with the story of the baptism of Jesus. Perhaps then, a good place for us to begin, would be by remembering our own baptism. Of course, that isn't always possible because many of us were baptized when we were infants, either sleeping or crying through it. Others were baptized when they were a bit older, or even as adults, and might remember it. But even if you can not remember your own baptism, most, if not all of us, have been present on Sunday mornings when we celebrate this Sacrament, and we are familiar with the baptismal vows which we all renew together.

As you already know, baptism is controversial because so many individuals and churches seem to have some rather set ideas. Baptism is always accompanied by water, but administered sometimes with sprinkling, with dipping, or with immersion. Many people are convinced that if it isn't done the right way, which usually means, their way, then it isn't genuine, and they are rarely hesitant to share their beliefs and doctrine. Others believe that baptism is appropriate for infants; but others will say it can only occur when a child is old enough to fully understand its meaning. Trust me, there are numerous other points of discussion.

In our tradition we take quite literally the words "one baptism for the remission of sins." Anyone who is baptized with water and in the name of the Trinity is part of the family of God, and we do not believe in re-baptism. Even if you slept or cried through it as an infant, once is it. Other churches and denominations mandate rebaptism for new members. And many individuals choose to be rebaptized on frequent occasion, such as when I was on a study tour to Israel and some of the clergy were baptized several times during the day we travelled along the Jordan River.

Many years ago a very wise professor said that Baptism is an outward sign of an inward spiritual grace; no amount of water, regardless of how it is applied can wash away sin. Only by God's mercy does it happen.

With Holy Baptism we are welcomed into the ageless universal kingdom of God's family.

I think part of this controversy is because people, especially clergy, see Baptism as an institutional rite, and encourage their members to say, "I was baptized a Methodist, Presbyterian, Episcopalian, Primitive Baptism, Lutheran" or some other denomination. I reject that idea because it is divisive, territorial, and just plain wrong. We are baptized into Christ's family. Period. And that is why, for all of us who transferred from another church or denomination, there was no second baptism. That is the

role of confirmation - to re confirm the promises vows of our baptism, and to publicly state that we wish to be part of the world wide Anglican Communion.

With all of that in mind, we return to our Gospel passage for this morning, and the baptisms being done by John, and the Baptism of Jesus. They are quite different, even though they include the two main characters and others standing in the background.

Baptism was not part of Judaism then, nor now. But, water was used as a symbol of change and a renewed commitment to following God's instructions. As I have pointed out before, the small group of Essenes practiced ritual bathing at the conclusion of each day, just before the evening meal. One by one they would step down into a pool of water, immerse themselves, and walk up the steps on the other side. It was their way of saying I made mistakes today and apologize for them. My loyalty is to God; my obedience is to the leader of our group. My commitment to all of you is to be better tomorrow than I was today. It was repeated each evening.

John took that concept and applied it to those who had come out to hear him along the Jordan River, and realized they really needed to change. They were tired of their old life and old way of doing things, responding and reacting. John invited them to step into the water, probably immersed them, and everyone else saw this public statement of a change in their life. In short, there was nothing unique or holy about it - but a human promise to change the direction of their life.

This is why John objected to immersing Jesus. You aren't a sinner, Jesus! You don't need this! You've done nothing wrong! You are doing all the right things and avoiding all the wrong ones. In short, he didn't want to do it.

Jesus held fast and insisted. I think several things, truly important spiritual things, occurred that day. The first was the emphasis that Jesus was standing shoulder to shoulder with the people. He wasn't claiming that he was too good to be one of them. In short, it was a very public statement that whether He was a direct descendent of David or people thought of him in more divine terms - he was with them. He was one of them.

I am sure that many of you have been watching "Victoria" on Sunday evenings on the public broadcasting channel, and perhaps you have read about her life. The greatest tragedy came when her beloved Prince Albert died. The queen became a recluse in almost perpetual mourning, never wanting to be seen in public, never wearing anything but dark purple and black.

Sometime later, she learned that a very good friend's husband had died. To the shock of her courtiers and servants she ordered her carriage to be made ready, and went to see the woman on an

unannounced visit. The new widow was astounded, but the queen put her at ease: I have not come as your queen, but as one widow to another.

Today, there is an over-used word, signalling. We send a signal to another person or group of our beliefs. The most frequent way it is done is on social media, and that is close to meaningless. As my father would say 'words are cheap action is real'. Jesus made it abundantly clear he wasn't just talk; he was action.

Jesus stood with the people in the Jordan; Queen Victoria travelled to see a widow; the list goes on and on. But the real question, perhaps the only important one is - what are you doing?

It is important because our great task in life is to put our faith into action, and the reason is simple. If we love God we love, honour, and respect the people of God. And we demonstrate that love for God by giving of ourselves. Whether it is the ability to write a cheque, or simply go sit with someone who is hurting, it doesn't matter. We built up others, the world, and put the emphasis on what we describe as being humane humans building up the whole of humanity.

As I said a few minutes ago, the baptism offered by John and Christian baptism as we know it today, have many elements in common, but they are very different. Today, we look at the baptisms of John, and what it means for us that Jesus insisted He would be baptized, and the tangible, physical message Jesus gave the world, telling us - I am here with you.

I am here with you when you have good news but there is no one with whom you can share it - I'll listen and cheer you on. I'm there with you when you are tempted to do what you already know is wrong - been there and experienced the challenge. I'm there with you when people are rude, disrespectful, mean and bullying. Trust me - I know about that. I'm there in the middle of the night when you are worried and scared. I'm sitting next to you in your doctor's office when there is bad news, and still there when you take your last breath. And after a lifetime of experiencing me there with you, you know you can trust me when I say I'm there with you in life after death.

From there, was take it to the next step. We imitate Christ. In this world, until He returns, we are his hands and feet, to do His will. We are being invited to 'be there' with others. I said last Sunday that it is our privilege to be able to take the message of Jesus to others - to tell our story of our spiritual safari with the Lord. But it is also our invitation to be there and be silent, to listen, just to be present. For in doing so, we are imitating Christ - giving of ourselves for the sake of others.