

Baptism into the Life of God

A sermon on Matthew 28:16-20 by Nathan Nettleton, 11 June 2017

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Message

Baptism is to the Christian life as a wedding is to the married life - an ongoing symbol of the vowed and relational life in God.

Sermon

Despite my Methodist upbringing and my somewhat catholic approach to liturgy and sacraments, I am by instinct and by conviction Baptist to the bone. Most of the things on which our Baptist forebears took their unpopular dissenting stand are things to which I am naturally drawn and deeply committed. But it has to be said that there are some really weird things about our Baptist family too. And one of the weirdest is the way we treat baptism.

Given that we got our name from our strong stance on getting baptism right, you'd hope there might be a chance we would have got it right, but it seems like we got distracted in the process. We have been very fond of the words we heard from Jesus tonight, commissioning us to go and make disciples and baptise them, but then we got so fixated on correcting one aspect of baptism – namely its relationship to a conscious commitment to discipleship – that we forgot pretty much everything else about it.

If you go to worship in most of our baptist churches, unless there is a baptism taking place, the chances are you will not see or hear anything that relates to baptism. The baptistery itself will probably be covered over and hidden from sight, and there is unlikely to be any talk of us being a baptised people.

Martin Luther sounded like he might have been founding the Baptist movement when he suggested that every congregation ought to sing a baptismal hymn in worship every week, and that every Christian ought to mark themselves with the sign of the cross every morning to remind themselves of who they are as those baptised into Christ, but you won't find too many baptists doing either of those things.

It's weird. It is as weird as if we had been founding something called the Marriage Movement, and then we'd focussed all our attention on a question about who was or wasn't allowed to get married without ever actually talking about the life-long disciplines of living out the married life. Oh yeah, a lot Baptists have been doing that lately too!

Comparing baptism and marriage is quite instructive in a number of ways. Both involve the making of vows in public to live a particular life. But tonight, I want to focus more on the nature of the life we enter rather than on the ritual by which we enter it.

The creation stories in the book of Genesis are very popular sources of reflection on the meaning of marriage, but you'll notice that they have nothing at all to say about the wedding ceremony. Their attention is all on the life of actually relating, and co-creating, and sharing the care of the earth. It is all about people finding in one another the sort of intimacy and community for which we were created, and in the living of which we most fully reflect the image of God.

Marriage, of course, is neither the only place one can find intimacy and community, nor the be all and end all of human intimacy and community, but it is popular enough and complex enough to stand as a classic symbol of our need for them. The Church has some very strong traditions of godly expressions of intimacy and community other than marriage, but it has been generally agreed that human beings were not designed to live without opening themselves to others in one way or another. We are created, in the likeness of God, as relational beings, and the fullness of life for which God has saved us in Christ and gifted us through the Holy Spirit is a life rich in love and in human intimacy and solidarity.

The reading we heard from the gospel according to Matthew is a crucial text in the history of the practice of baptism because it is from this passage that we get the form of words used in the baptism ceremony – “you are baptised in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit” – the form of words which has become essential to ensuring that a baptism will be recognised as validly Christian by other churches. But this trinitarian form of words gives us a lot more than just some guidelines for ecumenical diplomacy.

Far more importantly, it points us to the nature of baptism itself, to the nature of baptism as our immersion into the life of the God who is, by nature, a triune dance of relationships. God exists as a community, as a dance of intimacy, as an absolute openness to and investment in relationships. The Christian conviction that the one God exists as a relational trinity arises from our experience of God as intensely and unavoidably relational. It says that even before any other being was created, God already existed in communal relationships, burning with the fire of self-giving love and mutual indwelling: you in me and I in you.

When the Holy Spirit brooded over the formless watery chaos and in yearning love brought forth a newborn earth from the depths, the already-communing God was delighted. “How good is that!” said God to one another, for now the circle of God’s loving and relating could be expanded. And God went on creating. All that dwells on earth was pulled from those primeval waters of chaos and nothingness, and Holy Spirit was breathed into them that they might live, and each time God was delighted and all heaven rejoiced.

We human beings emerged when God said, “Let us create a species in our own image, according to our own likeness. One and yet more than one, and finding wholeness only in communion with one another, just as we do.” And God created humankind, and God was absolutely delighted!

You’ve all seen the Rublev icon of the Trinity, but perhaps you’ve never noticed how much it has to say about this. When you look at it, there is an almost tangible tenderness and openness between the three, but it is not just about the three. They are gathered around the table, the table of communion, but the communion is not just about the three.

For as you contemplate this icon, you gradually become aware that there is an opening in their circle, an opening at the table of their communion. There is room for another in this tender communion, and the empty space beckons to us who see it. This is not a private circle, a full table, a closed communion. We are invited into the love and relational life of this God. This is the love and the life for which we were drawn forth from the evolving creation.

But we know well the story of why that open place at the table remains painfully empty. We all live with the grief and the wounds of our vandalism of that intimate communion. Instead

of accepting all things as gifts and as the means of intimate communing with God, we grasped at things and consumed them as though consuming things could in itself fulfil us. And in the process we turned even one another into things to be grasped and consumed in violent denial of the intimacy of mutual indwelling for which we were created.

And now, grievously wounded, we limp along, all too often defending ourselves against any vulnerability and afraid to open ourselves to love. Our communities fragment, our families fragment, our closest relationships fragment, and in the end we ourselves fragment, unable even to hold together the intimate union of our own spirit and flesh.

But in the most astonishing act of vulnerable self-giving, God has come among us in Jesus to make all things new. Jesus has come among us and been baptised with the most fearsome baptism that few dare even imagine they might be able to endure. And he has come to reclaim us, to redeem us through that baptism, to lead us out of the slavery of disintegration and death, plunging us again into the deep waters of chaos and nothingness, and drawing us out again with our wounds washed and healed, breathing Holy Spirit into us again that we might live, and welcoming us back to our place at the table of communion in the love and life of God.

Here at the table, here in the body, here in community and solidarity, here is the life for which we were created, and the life into which we are saved when we are drawn from the waters of baptism. A life in which the brokenness is healed. A life in which those who have been torn apart are reconciled. A life that is intensely and passionately communal and relational. A life in which we are one body in Christ, just as God is one, even though we are many, just as God is many, and yet one.

One of the ways we express that intensely communal dimension of our baptised life is particularly pertinent and more than a little paradoxical here tonight. As I said in the welcomes earlier, we are honoured to have with us tonight, Christopher Willcock, one of the world's greatest composers of liturgical music. And Christopher is with us because he has very generously written for us the eucharistic music we have been singing for the last eight weeks. But there is a bit of a cringe element for us in having him here tonight. Although, as a liturgical composer, he mainly writes music to be sung by ordinary gatherings of the people of God, his music is very popular with the world's great choirs too, and so more often than not when he turns up to hear the first performances of his music, it is sung to a polished perfection that we won't get within a bull's roar of. In fact, some of us have singing voices that, high on enthusiasm and low on purity, could give a bull's roar a good run for its money.

But the more important truth is that this music is neither written nor sung to impress music critics. It is written and sung as an offering of worship to the God who values inclusive community far above music perfection. If we drew closer to musical perfection by excluding the voices of any of our number from participating in that offering, we would be polishing a greatly devalued gift. And Christopher, if I didn't know that you believe that too, then I wouldn't have been brave enough to invite you here tonight. Our singing of your music will be a sacramental sign of the messiness of God's work of reconciling a broken and fragmented and unharmonious people into one worshipping body.

That said, although excluding anyone would devalue the gift, including others can only enhance the sign, and the fact that we have some friends with us tonight from the Christ

Church Anglican choir will not only make our singing sound a little better, especially at the soprano end, but such ecumenical sharing and cooperation is a sign of the unity for which Jesus prayed and challenged us to make real.

These are signs of hope, of the emerging reality of a shared life that has truly been baptised into the reconciling relational life of the Trinity. But as yet, there is still a great grief at the heart of God, for God the consummate lover cannot but agonise over the many who remain fragmented and isolated, who are yet to rise again from the waters and return to their place at the table of communion.

And so now, we find ourselves gathered with the eleven on the mountain to which Jesus had directed them, and with them, we worship him, even though, like them, many of us have doubts even as we worship. And with them, we find ourselves commissioned by the risen Christ. “Go into all the world and make disciples of all nations, baptising them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to live by everything I have instructed you in.”

For indeed, having been baptised into the relational life of God, we are baptised into the reconciling mission of Christ in the world. We are sent into the world as Jesus was sent into the world, to follow him as a baptised people, and if he so leads us, to endure the baptism he had to endure for the life of the world. We are sent as witnesses to the life into which we have been saved, that through us Christ might lead others to the waters of baptism, that they too might be raised to the baptised life and that the love dance of the ever-relational God might be expanded and the table filled. And as those reconciled in baptism back into the life of God, the promise is with us, even when we are fearful and full of doubts: “Remember, I am with you always, even to the end of the age.”