

Do We Really Want Baptism?

A sermon on the Baptism of Jesus by Margie Dahl, 8 January 2017

Imagine our liturgical year as a movie. The first few scenes set the tone and this is a tone of waiting. We are waiting, not a twiddling our thumbs, how long is this going to take waiting. But it is a waiting of leaning forward, eyes peeled, scanning the horizon waiting. It is a waiting for God to act. It is a time of preparing ourselves for God acting in a new a decisive way. It is a waiting of hope, love, joy and peace. It is a time of waiting for all humanity.

Then the focus switches suddenly to a carpenter, a righteous man, in an obscure part of the Roman empire more than 2,000 years ago. An angel appears to him to encourage him to marry his pregnant girlfriend because the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. The safe arrival of any baby is cause for rejoicing, but especially in a time with no specialist obstetric care and poor hygiene. And we realise that this is what we had been waiting for. God is acting decisively in the birth of this little scrap of humanity, a tiny baby.

But the birth of Jesus is not all sweetness and light as the next scene shows. The magi who make such a pretty picture on our Christmas cards bring in their wake murder and lamentation and desperate refugees escaping bloodshed.

Now there is another jarring change of scene as a new character is introduced, emerging from the wilderness, dressed in rags, calling people to repentance and denouncing the rich and powerful. He is John the Baptist, John the Forerunner and, in Orthodox nomenclature, the Angel of the Desert.

He is inviting people to be baptised as a sign of their repentance and they come in droves. Even without Facebook, email and sms, the word is out. This man changes lives! Everyone thinks that he must be the Messiah, the coming one, but he is quite clear on this. There is another one to come, and he will come with judgement!

Then Jesus arrives, the one we saw last as a vulnerable baby, and he comes asking for baptism. He and John argue about this. John says “You’ve got it all back to front. It is me that needs to be baptised by you.” But eventually he agrees and Jesus is baptised.

Now this presents us with a dilemma. John’s baptism was a sign of repentance and what did Jesus have to repent of? What do we make of someone without sin being baptised for repentance? Maybe this baptism deserves a closer look.

Baptism is a sacrament. God gives Godself to us in many varied and glorious ways. Creation, the natural world in all its beauty and complexity, our bodies and communities, all that makes us human is part of God’s gracious self-giving, part of God’s precious gift to us. The Christ event, the miraculous birth which we have just celebrated in which the Word active in creation became flesh and dwelt among us, the preaching, teaching and healing, and the agonising, lonely death on the cross are part of God’s gracious self-giving, part of God’s precious gift to us. The sacrament of baptism with its layers and layers of symbol and meaning and the sacrament of the Eucharist in which also we remember that the death and resurrection of our Lord are part of God’s gracious self-giving, part of God’s precious gift to us.

These ways of God giving Godself to us are not so much discrete events as points along a continuum. A baptism is a joyous occasion but is only the beginning of the journey of

discipleship. Family and friends gather around and there is a happy party. But it is much, much more.

Like Jesus, we receive the gift of the Holy Spirit at baptism. No worries there, that's a good thing. But wait a minute, when we receive the gift of the Holy Spirit it means that we are empowered, enlightened. That means that we have no excuses for our lack of courage. We would all rather entertain fear. Fear comes knocking on our door and we say, come in. Let me lay the table. Stay the night, stay all my life. Fear has such dividends for us. Fear gives us the opportunity to cop out. Are we really sure we want the gift of the Holy Spirit?

In baptism we are united with Christ and his work. No worries there, that's a good thing. But wait a minute, when we are united with Christ, we live by values that are quite out of step with those of the rest of society. It means that the sign of the cross is upon us. For some people it has meant, and in some countries it still means, facing persecution, torture and even death. It can mean living a very insecure life. It means standing with Christ who was made a shining light for all the earth to see,

to draw all people everywhere
into a permanent alliance with God.

God gave Jesus, and us who follow him, a privileged role
as the ones who enable the blind to see the light;
the ones who open the gates of the stifling detention centres
and welcome the prisoners into the fresh air of freedom.

Are we really sure that we want to be united with Christ and his work?

In baptism we were incorporated into Christ's body on earth. No worries there, that's a good thing. But wait a minute, when we are incorporated into Christ's body it means that we are not free to please ourselves about how we spend our time, our money and our gifts.

We have a responsibility to that body. We are accountable to that body. We lose our autonomy that we cherish. Are we really sure that we want to be incorporated into Christ's body on earth?

In baptism we receive forgiveness of sin. No worries there, that's a good thing. But wait a minute, when we receive forgiveness of sin it means that we also receive a sharper understanding of what sin is. It means coming to terms with the tugs towards sinfulness that we all experience from time to time. I like to think of myself as a good person, but sometimes I'm shocked at the thoughts that come into my mind. Forgiveness of sin means that we acknowledge our ongoing need of reconciliation with God and with others. Are we really sure that we want to receive forgiveness of sin?

In baptism we are given new birth. No worries there, that's a good thing. But wait a minute, when we are given new birth, it means a death, a death to ourselves. It means seeking the face of God in the big and small decisions of life. It means putting the welfare of others before our own. It means putting our feet into the footsteps of Jesus as he travelled around working for good and helping people out from under the devil's thumb and back onto their feet. Are we really sure that we want to be given new birth?

Oscar Romero was the bishop of El Salvador who was shot dead in his church as he celebrated the Eucharist. He understood what baptism was all about. He wrote:

*If some day they take the radio station away from us,
if they close down our newspaper,
if they don't let us speak,
if they kill all the priests and the bishop too,
and you are left, a people without priests
each one of you must be God's microphone,
each one of you must be a messenger, a prophet.
The church will always exist
as long as there is one baptised person.
And that one baptised person who is left in the world
is responsible for holding aloft the banner of the Lord's truth
and of his divine justice.*

Taking all of that into account, do we really want baptism? Of course we do. Nothing worthwhile is ever achieved without cost, and in this case the rewards are enormous, infinitely worthwhile. From that damp moment we are united with Christ and with our God who created and is creating,
The one who created the universe
and stretched out the skies;
the one who constructed the earth
and produced everything that grows from it;
the one who breathes life into the world's people
and kindles the spark of life within them.

At the Easter Vigil we renew our baptismal vows. Trusting in God's help, we promise to continue in the community of faith, the apostles' teaching, the breaking of bread and the prayers. We promise that we will proclaim by word and example the good news of God in Christ, that we will seek Christ in all people, and love your neighbour as ourselves. We pledge ourselves to strive for justice and peace, and respect the dignity of every human being. We renew these vows annually because it is easy to lose focus. The fire in the belly so easily becomes the warm inner glow.

St Augustine said, "Lord you have made us for yourself and our hearts are restless until they find their rest in you." Only in the life of God's baptised people will we find this rest, joy and fulfilment that is promised. We are confident that God will be with us as we travel around working for good and helping people out from under the devil's thumb and back onto their feet. Baptism is a magnificent gift to be received with wonder and joy. It far surpasses anything we could imagine or devise, for ultimately it is God's chosen means of self giving to us.