

# Baptism

## by Rev Allister Lane

2<sup>nd</sup> December 2018

## Jeremiah 33: 14- 16

## John 5.19-27

This week I celebrated a significant milestone.  
Ten years ago I was ordained as a Minister – right here.

I have been reflecting a lot this week.  
What I've encountered in ministry, what I've learned, how I've changed. And above all, I feel a deep sense of joy at being able to serve God and Christ's Church.

One of the greatest joys over the ten years of being a Minister here at St John's has been something that I have received.  
And that is that three out of our four children have been baptised here. (our oldest was baptised before we came to St John's)

This has been very important for me and my family.  
We have received the ministry of you all in this congregation;  
we have felt held and encouraged by the faith we share together.  
We deeply value the communal nature of our faith.

And so, on this tenth anniversary I hope you will indulge me in preaching about baptism –as one of my greatest delights of ministry – important for me personally and also (I believe) for us communally.

I'm aware that we as a congregation have some different thoughts about baptism and what it means. We can be 'wired' with preconceptions about what authentic baptism is, and isn't.

Baptism is a really important aspect of our faith. One that grounds us.  
And it is perhaps because of this that we probably aren't inclined to question our understanding of baptism as rigorously as other aspects of our faith.

Even if you haven't given it much thought at all, I want to offer an understanding of baptism that gets past the mere 'mechanics' and supposed 'pre-requisites' of baptising, to get at the heart of what baptism is about.

Among other things, baptism signals the Christian understanding of what God has done in Christ to rescue us from death and bring us into new life.

This is the promise Jesus makes in today's Gospel reading:

<sup>24</sup>Very truly, I tell you, anyone who hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life, and does not come under judgement, but has passed from death to life.

Baptism expresses this movement: from death to life.

This movement from one realm into another.<sup>1</sup>

In the early church this movement into God's realm is pictured as deliverance from darkness into light:

you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people, in order that you may proclaim the mighty acts of him who called you out of darkness into his marvellous light.

<sup>10</sup> Once you were not a people,  
but now you are God's people;  
once you had not received mercy,  
but now you have received mercy. (1 Peter 2:9-10)

Wow! ...You are God's people...for you have received mercy.

When I was training for ministry in Dunedin, one of my lecturers told me of a time someone approached him, knowing he was a lecturer training Presbyterians, who wanted to know what Presbyterians are about.

"Do you believe in infant baptism?" he asked.

My lecturer replied: "Believe in it...?! I've seen it done!"

For some, the baptism of babies is not regarded as authentic.

The main reason usually given is that babies can't make a conscious decision to follow Jesus.

Now, there's no way I want to argue that adult (or 'Believers') baptism is wrong, but I do want to recognise the strong theology of infant baptism and why it is necessary to hold on to as well as the baptism of adults.

Let me ask you to do some thinking...  
Does baptism ensure our salvation...?

In the New Testament we are told:

[God has] saved us and called us with a holy calling, not according to our works but according to his own purpose and grace.

This grace was given to us in Christ Jesus before the ages began, <sup>10</sup>but it has now been revealed through the appearing of our Saviour Christ Jesus, who abolished death and brought life and immortality to light through the gospel. (2 Timothy 1:9-10)

Salvation is given to us by grace, through what God has done in Christ.

So, baptism does not achieve or ensure our salvation.  
So, what's it about?

Baptism is about welcome.

As mentioned earlier, baptism signals what God has done, and expresses a movement. We have been moved from one realm into another – from death to life.

We are rescued by what our Saviour Christ Jesus has done – not by what we do.

---

<sup>1</sup> As we heard in our other reading today, this is what God spoke through the prophet Jeremiah: "<sup>15</sup>In those days and at that time I will cause a righteous Branch to spring up for David; and he shall execute justice and righteousness in the land. <sup>16</sup>In those days Judah will be saved and Jerusalem will live in safety." God is establishing a new realm for people – a realm not of death, but of justice and righteousness – where people will live, really live.

Our baptism expresses the truth of what God has already done.  
Baptism is a response by the Church for the wonderful salvation given to us.  
In fact, baptism is the BEST response – as together we acknowledge the life we are given in Christ.  
We acknowledge this by expressing the welcome of God;  
we express hospitality and inclusion on God's behalf.  
We make space for one another, recognising that God gives us belonging in His realm.

Can you see how an emphasis in baptism on what we do might be misplaced because of this?

An emphasis on my decision to be baptised (as the critical initiative) highlights MY agency as most important.  
But the Gospel insists that is the action of God that is primary.  
Baptism is first and foremost about what God has done, not what we do.

We express our shared faith in what God has done by baptising.  
And when we baptise a baby we are demonstrating that God's purposes are not limited by natural human capability.

It is a great tragedy, in my view, that there has been such a dominant emphasis in Modernity on *reason*, as the main characteristic of humanity that gives evidence that we bear the image of God.

After all, what does such an emphasis say about those who cannot reason?  
Those without cognitive ability – such as babies, or those with intellectual disabilities...?  
Are they not able to participate in a shared human response to God's grace?

Hear again what else Jesus says in today's Gospel reading:  
Very truly, I tell you, the hour is coming, and is now here, when the dead will hear the voice of the Son of God

The dead will hear...?

This, of course, isn't saying humans have 'everlasting hearing'.  
This is about the power of God's Word.  
The power of God's Word calls the dead to new life.  
The power of God's Word summons God's new realm.

Furthermore, it indicates that God's Word has a power that defies our experiences and (perhaps) our expectations.  
And that we should be cautious about imposing limitation on God's activity – especially when that limitation is culturally informed (like, the virtue in our culture of personal autonomy and free choice).

God's Word summons God's realm.  
We glimpse this in Jesus earthly ministry.

Jesus radically changed the understanding of how God relates to children. He welcomes them as fully human.  
(as has been said here recently) Jesus is radically inclusive.

We celebrate this together in baptism – both adults and babies – all of us.  
We celebrate that God draws us together – all welcome in God's realm.  
We celebrate that we each have a vital part.

This is why the New Testament image of the Church as the Body of Christ is so vital.

God gathers us together as members of the Body of Christ, each one with unique gifts and contributions that are needed as part of God's realm.

Let me read a passage from 1 Corinthians that was read as part of my ordination service ten years ago... (1 Cor 12:4-7, 27)

"Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit; and there are varieties of services, but the same Lord; and there are varieties of activities, but it is the same God who activates all of them in everyone. To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good.

Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it."

As I said at the start of this sermon, it has been such a joy that our children have received baptism here.

And we celebrate our children's baptism every year.

On the anniversary of their Baptism we go out for a special meal together (usually somewhere with a meal that is 'happy'), and we celebrate the love of God for that person and for us all.

More significantly, we also celebrate the love of God expressed in baptism every week.

We do this here with you, our church family.

We come to give and receive, together in the ministry and mission of the Body of Christ. So that we will all grow in our faith.

Praise be to God!