

On the occasion of Frith's baptism – baptism, family and following Jesus

Romans 6: 3-5, 8-1; Mark 3:31-35

In the ancient church baptisms always took place on Easter Sunday. The imagery was powerful and connected directly with our reading from Romans: The person was *immersed*¹ into Jesus' death and raised with him into resurrected life.

Dead people don't raise themselves to life. God does. The central image of baptism then, is concerned with *God's* activity not the believer's. Faith and a profession of belief, certainly have to be present, but it is *God's* gracious act of self-giving and gift of new life that is being signified. . It is *God* who reaches into the watery-deep of death, as it were, and by the power of the Spirit, pulls that person up and out and into life.

There seems little doubt that in the ancient church full immersion baptism was the norm until very late in the piece.² The Eastern churches and Baptists of course, still practice this exclusively. For pragmatic reasons, today our church often baptises through the sprinkling with water, though full immersion is used also. It's a moot point, I think, as to the extent a sacrament loses its potency when it changes.

Whatever one may think about this, it is important to grasp that, first and foremost, the imagery is about what *God* has done in Christ – not about what *we* are doing.

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¹ There seems little doubt from scripture and tradition (early art and extra biblical tradition), that baptism was about being immersed under and up out of the water. The verb *baptizō* literally meant "to dip" (usually referring to a thorough submerging of an object in a liquid). Metaphorically it meant "to be overwhelmed by something" (for example the influence of wine). Pouring and sprinkling were distinct actions that were represented by different Greek verbs. Orthodox today still fully immerse even infants, covering them with oil and holding them by the ankle and dipping. See Everett Ferguson, *Baptism in the Early Church: History, Theology, and Liturgy in the first Five Centuries*. Eerdmans, 2009, ch.3 or p.38, 59.

See Marius Nel's useful review / critique (especially the 'Discussion' section), of Ferguson's assumptions and arguments. <http://blog.beliefnet.com/jesuscreed/2010/01/saturday-afternoon-book-review.html>

² C15th – C16th.

Perhaps less dramatically though equally mysteriously, for Christians, baptism (like its Old Testament equivalent, circumcision), has always been associated with belonging to the covenant people of God. This renewed and “better”³ covenant *incorporates* all those who belong to Christ *into* his body, the church. Baptism signifies this incorporation and opens up the person to life in the family of God.

As such the baptised are not only *related* as brothers and sisters⁴ in Christ’s family, but are made *members of one another* – we are mystically connected with each other, by his Spirit.⁵

When you pause to think about it, this is a very radical thing...

Each week we celebrate this when we “give each other the peace” after the call and response which echoes scripture:⁶

E te whanau, we are the body of Christ!

And the people say:

By one Spirit we are baptised into one body!

It’s important that we don’t *just* see this as a static thing, a kind of status achieved through an initiation ceremony – though it is this. Everywhere throughout the New Testament letters, baptism is associated not so much with a new way of *being* as a new way of *living*.

Again, the sign is saying, since we are part of Christ’s body we *belong* to each other. This means we *act differently* towards each other. In Ephesians we read:

So then, putting away falsehood, let all of us speak the truth to our neighbours, for we are members of one another.⁷

³ Heb.6:9; 7:19-22; 8:1-6.

⁴ 1 Cor.8:12.

⁵ Rom.12:5.

⁶ 1 Cor.12:13.

⁷ Ehp.4:25.

Our Gospel reading is making this very point. The true kindred of Jesus are those who follow God with all their hearts. “Who are my mother and brothers?” asks Jesus. “And looking at those who sat around him, he said, “*Here* are my mother and my brothers! Whoever does the will of *God* is my brother and sister and mother.”

This is quite extreme stuff and we tend to want to hear it as semitic hyperbole. Yet the text itself gives us no reason to do this.

In some quarters today, none-the-less in some forms of Christianity, there’s a very virulent political ideology which surrounds talk of the family. This was equally true in Jesus time since post-exilic Judaism was essentially a family based religion. This almost obsessive concern with the maintenance and protection of immediate family based on blood ties, probably has its roots in a sense of being threatened. Yet the scriptures are everywhere insistent that it is the covenant community of the baptised, living out an authentic Gospel that constitutes our true identity and our real, all inclusive extended family – regardless of race or class.

In 1 Corinthians 12:13 we read:

For in the one Spirit we were all baptized into one body – Jews or Greeks, slaves or free – and we were all made to drink of one Spirit.

Elsewhere Jesus is reported as saying: “Not everyone who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who does the will of my Father in heaven. On that day many will say to me, ‘Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and cast out demons in your name, and do many deeds of power in your name?’ Then I will declare to them, ‘I never knew you; go away from me, you evildoers.’⁸

Later again in Matthew’s Gospel Jesus spells out the basis on which our actions and outward profession of belief is judged: “Truly I tell you”, Jesus says, “just as you did it to one of the least of these who are *members* of my family, you did it to me.”⁹

⁸ Mtt.7:21-23.

⁹ Mtt.25:40.

Elsewhere in Mark's Gospel we read:

One of the scribes came near and ... asked him, "Which commandment is the first of all?" Jesus answered, "The first is, 'Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is one; you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength.' The second is this, 'You shall love your neighbour as yourself.' There is no other commandment greater than these."

Then the scribe said to him, "You are right, Teacher; you have truly said that 'he is one, and besides him there is no other'; and 'to love him with all the heart, and with all the understanding, and with all the strength,' and 'to love one's neighbour as oneself,' – this is much more important than all whole burnt offerings and sacrifices."

When Jesus saw that he answered wisely, he said to him, "You are not far from the kingdom of God."¹⁰

So then, authentic engagement with each other within the *household of God* and beyond, is at the core of the life that flows out of our identification with Christ in baptism.

Showy works of religion are meaningless. The community of the baptised is where truth is both spoken and *lived out* in love spilling over to our neighbours. And it is this kind of life that that is the hall-mark true religion. When we live with compassion, and justice towards each other, doing good to each other, showing neighbour love, then we are behaving as part of our *real* family, the family with which we will travel into eternity.

¹⁰ Mk.12:28-34.

Power Point:





