

A Sermon preached by The Reverend David R. Mason
Second Sunday after the Epiphany
January 16, 2011

In keeping with the Epiphany theme that Christ is the light of the world, the manifestation and declaration of God's great love to all the peoples of the earth, the Church has seen fit to emphasize and bring to our attention the great sacrament of Baptism. Last Sunday was the official celebration of the baptism of Jesus by John the Baptizer, and some of you may recall that Bishop Hollingsworth said that in our baptism we are not baptized into the baptism of Jesus, but into his death and resurrection. This is often forgotten or neglected, but it is there in the key prayers of Holy Baptism: "Grant, O Lord, that all who are baptized into the death of Jesus Christ your Son may live in the power of his resurrection," and "We thank you, Father, for the water of baptism. In it we are buried with Christ in his death. By it we share in his resurrection." (BCP p. 306) And these baptismal prayers, in turn, reflect the deep conviction of the Apostle Paul: "Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? Therefore, We have been buried with him by baptism into death, so that just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life" (Rom. 6:3-4).

However difficult it may be for us to grasp the meaning and implication of these words – that we are buried with Christ in his death so that we might walk in newness of life – hearing it anew last week had the effect of "awakening me from my dogmatic slumber" (to borrow a trope from the philosopher Kant). That is to say the bishop and the baptismal prayers and St. Paul, cause me, at least, to want to rethink what are, perhaps, some of our conventional views of baptism. I hope you will join with me in this.

But before we begin the rethinking process let us pay close attention to the remarkable account of baptizing that we have in today's gospel account. For this, too, stirs the creative juices. Here the Baptist declares of Jesus that he "is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world" and says that he (John) "came baptizing with water ... that he (Jesus) might be revealed to Israel." But I'm sure I had never noticed that this account does not clearly assert – as the other three gospels do – that Jesus was actually baptized by John. What it does say is that John saw the Spirit descending like a dove and remaining on Jesus. And John the Baptist testified; "I myself did not know him (that itself is intriguing), but the one who sent me to baptize with water said to me 'He on whom you see the spirit descend and remain is the one who baptizes with the Holy Spirit' (John 1:29-33).

Wow!! John baptizes with water, just as we do, but Jesus the Christ baptizes with the Holy Spirit. I am not sure what that means, but together with the realization that in baptism we die with Christ and are raised to newness of life, it is enough to cause me to want to rethink what we must understand Baptism to be. Now rethinking does not mean we throw overboard all old beliefs; but we examine them anew in the light of death, resurrection, & baptism with the Holy Spirit.

Let us begin by stating some old, long held convictions, namely that Baptism is a sacrament and, in particular, as Anglicans have always said, one of two “Sacraments ordained of Christ our Lord in the Gospel, that is to say, Baptism and the Supper of the Lord” (Article xxv in the Articles of Religion). “ordained of Christ ... in the Gospel.” This claim is trickier than it seems, however, because nowhere in the gospels does Jesus actually baptize anyone. Clearly, his disciples do baptize, but in one place the gospel specifically says, “it was not Jesus himself but his disciples who baptized” (Jn 4:2). His disciples did on occasion baptize, and in the Acts of the Apostles there are innumerable baptisms, and the Apostle Paul, who was conflicted about baptism, which sometimes seemed to be intended as a mark of alienation from Jews and others, nevertheless came to regard baptism as a sign of oneness with Christ – dying and rising – and thus with all whom God loves and redeems. And, finally, there is the risen Christ’s commission in Matthew: “Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit” (Mtt 28:19). So we may confidently conclude that, yes, baptism is ordained by Christ.

But a sacrament? What is a sacrament? I give you the standard answer of the Catechism: it is “an outward and visible sign of an inward and spiritual grace given unto us; ordained by Christ As a means whereby we receive (that grace) and a pledge to assure us thereof” The outward sign, clearly, is water and the act of baptizing in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. The inward and spiritual grace is “a death unto sin, and a new birth unto righteousness” (there’s that again).

Let us now face the question: Does this act of baptism itself set us apart from all others who are not baptized and confer upon us alone the means of salvation? Does it therefore, distinguish us from others as right from wrong, true from false, as saved from damned? I think many of you are aware that I reject this older, conventional view. But why? Is it because of a sensibility of toleration? Is it because we notice that non-Christians behave as well and as badly as we do? Yes, but more.

I have often bristled when one says, “I am baptized a Catholic” or “I am baptized an Episcopalian.” No I want to say, “we are all baptized Christians!” But even that won’t quite do. We should make it clear the Baptism is a sign and a pledge : A sign that not just we, but all persons are children of God, recipients of God’s redeeming love and inheritors of the kingdom of God. Our baptism is a pledge to witness to God’s universal redemptive love by word and deed. We are not granted salvation or made inheritors of the kingdom of God by our baptism. That was already God’s gift to us. But we are put in a position to make it known to everyone that they are already inheritors of the kingdom of God.

Let me approach this the way a nineteenth century Anglican theologian did. (The following is in Schubert Ogden, Is There Only One True Religion or Are There Many, pp. 86-87.) Frederick W. Robertson, a friend of Charles Kingsley and Frederick Denison Maurice whom you have heard me praise, struggled to make sense of the church’s catechism in use at the time that said forthrightly that “in Baptism... I was made a member of Christ, the child of God, and an inheritor of the kingdom of God.” But Robertson was convinced that “baptism could not make me a

child of God unless I were one by reason of my Humanity already.” And so he investigated the uses of the verb, “to make,” and he found that it can legitimately mean not simply to create anew, but to “declare a fact to be.” Here are the questions and answers on baptism that he prepared for his confirmation candidates:

Q. What is baptism?

A. The authoritative declaration of a fact.

Q. What fact?

A. That I am God’s child.

Q. Why then do you say that I am so made in baptism?

A. Being made, I mean – declared to be.

Q. Explain what you mean.

A. As soon as a king dies, his successor is king. Coronation declares the fact but does not make him king. He was one before, but it corroborates, declares, affirms, seals, the fact by a recognized form used for that purpose.

Not bad! Not bad at all. A very helpful way to understand baptism. In it we do not change a state of being; we do not acquire salvation; we do not even become, for the first time, a “member of Christ.” We declare, affirm, and seal a fact, the fact, that by reason of our humanity we are, all of us, children of God, inheritors of God’s pure unbounded love – God’s salvation. We make that fact known and available to all.

Thus to die with Christ and to rise to newness of life means, perhaps, to be place in a position to see the same dreary, deadly, recurring facts of human sin, alienation, and bitterness anew. Of course, we do not cease sinning; we have always known that. But we are enabled to see and to declare that human sinfulness is not the final truth of the matter. We see and declare that God’s pure unbounded love redeems all humanity, and that is the final truth. We walk in newness of life. There is so much more to it than this, but this is a beginning.

And what about being baptized by the Holy Spirit? Is it the instigation to walk in newness of life? I don’t know. But let me try a suggestion from the words of President Obama on Wednesday night in Tucson (Jan 12, 2011). Believing that the Spirit blows where it chooses perhaps to be baptized by the Holy Spirit is “to expand our moral imaginations, to listen to each other more carefully, to sharpen our instincts for empathy, and remind ourselves of all the ways our hopes and dreams are bound together.” (Obama’s Remarks in Tucson, NY Times.com) Our baptism declares a fact; and it keeps alive the unquenchable hope that God’s love conquers fear, bondage and death. Amen