

Baptism – Good News and a Challenge

I am guessing that most people have been to a baptism on a Sunday morning of a baby. The guests start arriving, not quite sure where to go and what to do. The parents turn up with the baby in a sleeper or onesie so that the lovely christening outfit will not get soiled when the baby burps. That adorable outfit may have been the exquisite old lace dress from grandma, a gift from a talented friend or what their older sibling wore. Keeping it clean and keeping the bonnet on are the usual challenges.

The baby makes a few cute gurgling noises as they are passed from parent to priest, as the water is poured over their heads and as the oil of the cross is smeared on their foreheads. Soon the baby is back in its carrier, wearing their comfortable sleeper and being absolutely adorable. It all closes with coffee, cake and perhaps some balloons for the adults and children.

For most of us, this is the image of baptism. It is quick, adorable and the one being baptized is usually an infant, although occasionally it may be a child or an adult. It is in church, clean, tidy and mostly predictable.

In our tradition baptism takes place at a font with some small quantity of water poured over the head of the candidate from a shell or cup. Occasionally you may see or be part of a full immersion baptism where the candidate is dunked three times while in a tank large enough to hold the candidate and the priest. If you are curious, there is a full immersion baptism tank at the new All Saints' Anglican Church in Waterloo. It is under the floor in front of the altar.

This is rather different from the baptism of Jesus that we heard about in our gospel reading. We are told that Jesus has travelled from Galilee to be baptized by John in the river Jordan.

We have to go back to our reading for the second Sunday of Advent which describes John the Baptist, in the wilderness of Judea by the river Jordan. He wore clothing of camel's hair, with a leather belt, and his food was locusts and wild honey. Lots of people from Jerusalem and Judea were going out to be baptized by John, confessing their sins. John accuses the Pharisees and Sadducees, who come out to see what is happening, of being a brood of vipers. John proclaims that one who is more powerful than he is coming who will baptize them with the Holy Spirit. (Matthew 3:1-12)

There are no cute outfits, it is messy on the bank of the river and there was almost certainly no cake afterwards.

There was likely a crowd who came to watch, listening to John's call to "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near." Trying to decide if they had the courage to participate and make the commitment. Jesus arrives to be baptized by John. He is a man, an adult, probably about 30 years old. Likely an established carpenter.

It was not the start to his life, but it was the start to his public life of ministry. It would be the start to his three years of teaching and healing. He knows that it will not be easy. There will be times when he is hungry, when there is no where to stay, he will be stoned and chased out of town. The crowds will pursue him in hope of healing. He will find it

difficult to escape the crowds to find the time and space to pray to his father in heaven. And in the end, Jesus knows that there will be a cruel death.

As Jesus comes out of the water after being baptized the Spirit of God descends like a dove and a voice from heaven says, “This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased.” (v17) In his baptism, Jesus has been marked as the true king, as the Messiah. And yet, it is a strange coronation for a strange king.

This baptism reveals Jesus identity as the Son of God. This baptism reveals Jesus is beloved by God. This baptism reveals that we are beloved of God. We have seen many pictures of the Holy Spirit descending like a dove, and yet, we sometimes forget the heavenly voice, “This is my Son, the beloved.” We sometimes forget the heavenly voice that says we are a beloved child of God. Each of us. Every one of us.

We sometimes forget that God has claimed all people as beloved children, including those who may annoy or frustrate us. All people are children of God.

In baptism we receive the gift of God’s grace, and the blessing of peace, as we read in the last verse of the psalm, “The Lord shall give strength to this people; the Lord shall give this people the blessing of peace.”

Isaiah has shared the promise of God that the coming Messiah, who we will know as Jesus, will make all things new and breathe new life into all people. And here, God’s promises are being fulfilled.

Jesus knew that his baptism was not insurance against the conflict that would come his way but instead it would arm him to meet it and to master it. So to, our baptism is not insurance or protection against conflict that will present itself to us in our lives, but it arms and strengthens us to meet it and to master it.

Every time we rehearse our baptismal covenant, whether it is at someone’s baptism, or during a service of renewal of baptismal vows, or for those of who are ordained, when we renew them during our ordination, every time we recall some of the conflicts we might encounter in our lives and pray for how we will respond.

With all the stress, anger, and violence around the world and in our community, there are two of those vows that I would like to share, and I encourage you to renew as I read them. They can be found near the bottom of page 159 of the BAS, if you want to follow along. Remembering that God knows us well, and we can do little without God’s help, our response to the questions is: **I will, with God’s help.**

Will you seek and serve Christ in all persons, loving your neighbour as yourself? **I will, with God’s help.**

Will you strive for justice and peace among all people, and respect the dignity of every human being? **I will, with God’s help.**

The reality is that neither of these vows is easy to fulfil, and sometimes the cost can be high. And we are called by God to keep trying because we will with God’s help.

Thanks be to God. Amen.

Readings: Matthew 3:13-17
Isaiah 42:1-9

Psalm 29
Matthew 3:1-12