

Sermon for the Feast of the Baptism of the Lord Year C 2019

It is one of the striking aspects of this time of year that traditions and rituals are allowed to rise to the surface. Even in this young and free-spirited country of ours there are enormous familial and societal pressures that certain rituals *will be* observed at this time. *'It's what we always do. It's how our family have always done it'*, whether it is the obligatory Christmas family lunch, the week by the seaside in the holiday house, and if we're lucky maybe even Christmas church. They have a remarkable hold on us. For the foolish or stupid they are ignored at peril! Family rituals evolve and change, but often there remains a pretty stable core that passes through the generations, a core that maintains its pull and power; that maintains its ability to shape us and influence us. Because stable rituals and customs tell us what is important to us. Rituals help anchor us to our identity. They help tell us who we are.

This is of course how it works in the church, in the vast constellation of signs and symbols: they help tell us who we are and what is important to us. And because we are dealing with *eternal* truths and *eternal* mysteries, we need a fair bit of help to communicate what is important to us; a fair bit of help for us to express what we think is important. We have seen much of this at work these past few weeks as we have observed together the central mystery of the Incarnation. Some very striking customs and rituals, words and images come into play at this time to help us express this central truth of Christian faith.

Today - as we celebrate the feast of the Baptism of the Lord - we really conclude our Christmas celebrations. It might seem a bit strange that just last week we were celebrating the infant Christ adored by the Magi, and today we now celebrate the commencement of his adult public ministry. But the church has from its very early days attached the commemoration of the Baptism of the Lord to the Christmas celebrations. Our celebrations of Christmas Day and of the Holy Family and the Epiphany and now the Baptism of the Lord each highlight *a different aspect* of the mystery of the Incarnation. That we spread out our celebrations recognises that the great work God accomplished in the Incarnation of his Son cannot be expressed or contained in a single celebration.

But what unites them - the common thread, if you like - is the idea of manifestation - appearing: God has shown himself (manifested himself) to us in these mysteries. But although Jesus' own baptism anticipates the Church's Sacrament of Baptism, we shouldn't confuse the two. Jesus *does not* receive the Sacrament of Baptism, and what John imparts is not what the Church is doing when it baptises. So, Christ being baptised only makes sense in the light of this idea of 'manifestation'; of God revealing, showing us some particular truth here. Simply put, the Baptism of Christ is the occasion when *the Trinity is revealed*: the Son makes himself known, the Father speaks, and the Holy Spirit descends. It is this mystery - the mystery of the Trinity - that brings the revelations, the various manifestations the holy season of Christmas to their fulfilment.

Now, the church, of course is the community of the baptised, coming from our Lord's own command in Matthew's Gospel, to *Go to all the nations and baptise them in the Name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit*. What is revealed of God's own identity on the banks of the Jordan is what *we assent to* in Christian baptism. With the Eucharist - also observed at our Lord's direct command - baptism is the *primary* sign and symbol *that tells us who we are*. If we want to know what Christians believe and hold to be important, we can start there because baptism is literally the start for Christians.

Because it is so important and so much meaning is invested in baptism it is important to know what we think we are doing when we baptise! Because, of course, baptism is much more than a mere custom or ritual much less a social convention. The danger of so many rituals - whether in family life or societal life or religious life - is that they can be cut off from their origins and so cut off from their meaning; we lose sight of the origins and we can lose our identity. Rituals and symbolic actions that are maintained without an appreciation of the meaning or origin can become superstitions or simply polite custom. But baptism is too important for that to happen...

Baptism is so important because it brings us to share in the life of grace. This is why it is never good enough to say baptism is just a ritual or just a custom or just a tradition. Anglicans have done themselves no favours by allowing the language of 'getting my kid done' to be spoken of in relation to baptism. It has so tamed and domesticated something which ought to be an utterly life-altering experience! Baptism is a sacrament and for Christians sacramental rituals do not simply represent grace, they actually *effect* grace. Baptism is not simply a symbol of new life, we actually receive new life. We don't merely have our sins symbolically washed away, they are actually washed away. We don't merely symbolise death to our old life, we actually die to our old life. The grace we celebrate and symbolically enact actually *becomes real* in the sacrament.

This is why the church's sacraments, including baptism ought to be celebrated as fully and generously as possible: because God is doing big, generous things through them! The early church insisted baptism be celebrated in living, moving water. As the church grew and became more settled, lakes and rivers were shrunk into stone pools so to be contained in churches, but still built to be walked into, entering one side and leaving another. They might have been cross-shaped or even tomb-shaped but built so to speak of dying to the old life of sin for the new life of Christ. Abundant water was seen as important to speak both of a thorough bath but also of *drowning* the old Adam. In baptism we had to expect to get wet, *and* run the risk of drowning. Both life and death are part of the package of baptism life. We are washed, made pure, receive new life, as well as die to self, die to sin, reject Satan, turn away from evil. It's not for the faint hearted.!

It is important we stay connected to those meanings. It is important we reclaim those meanings if they have been neglected or lost. The waters of the font demand a terrible and exacting price of us who confess the name of Christ.

Today, as we celebrate the Baptism of the Lord and come to baptise little Olivia, let us be reminded that the very heart of our identity as Christians rests on what is revealed/manifested today: that God is Trinity; and that in baptism we are invited to share in the life of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. Let us be sure we stay connected to the saving mysteries at the heart of our faith. Let us not neglect them or take them for granted. They are too important for that! May we let them be for us a continued sign and source of grace and life. Amen.