

Sermon Feast of the Baptism of the Lord Year C 2025

The feast of the Baptism of the Lord as we celebrate it today, is an invitation to consider Christian baptism and indeed our own baptism. The gospel record of course indicates that Christians did not invent baptism. John, as we know, baptises. His was a baptism of repentance. Christian baptism, certainly influenced by John's practice is, however, radically altered. It is conducted in the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. And, as the Catechism of the Book of Common Prayer reminds us *baptism makes us a member of Christ, the child of God, and an inheritor of the kingdom of heaven*. So, Christian baptism has a much wider scope than John's.

The Didache – that important late-first or early-second century Christian document – gives insight into many interesting aspects of the post-apostolic church, including insights into the Christian practice of baptism. Remember, this is the earliest surviving Christian manual we have, perhaps written even before parts of the New Testament. On baptism, the Didache records: *And concerning baptism, baptise this way: Having first said all these things, baptise into the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, in living water. But if you have not living water, baptise into other water; and if you can not in cold, in warm. But if you have not either, pour out water thrice upon the head into the name of Father and Son and Holy Spirit. But before the baptism let the baptiser fast, and the baptised, and whatever others can; but you shall order the baptised to fast one or two days before.*

Human nature being what it is, over the centuries we have steered toward the minimalist course. If we can get away with doing less, that is what we tend to do. Over the course Christian history, the idea of baptism in what was called in the Didache 'living water' became rarer and rarer. And the other provisions becoming the norm rather than the exception. Such that we end up with what I have called 'bird bath fonts' stuck in some dark dusty corners of most churches. But thereby really undermining the central importance baptism ought to have in the Christian life.

As most of you will be aware just a few days before Christmas we pushed back against some of that liturgical and sacramental minimalism and baptised Mitch at Elwood Beach. Now just to say, as the Didache assures us, any baptism in which water is poured in the name of the Trinity *is valid*. So, what we are talking about here is not so much what's right or wrong or even better or worse. Rather about how to celebrate the sacrament in its fullness.

In the same way it would be valid to share Blood of Christ in individual cups. But the sacramental fullness is *better* expressed by sharing one cup. A Christian marriage can be celebrated with just the couple and two witnesses. But the sacramental fullness is *better* expressed when celebrated amongst the wider community of the faithful.

In the articles of religion, Article XXVII states that baptism is *not only a sign of profession*. In other words, it is not just ritual by which we mark personal Christian. It does this but not only. It is also, as the article goes on to say, *a sign of regeneration or new birth by which they that receive baptism are rightly grafted into the church, the promises of the forgiveness of sin, and our adoption to be the sons of God by the Holy Ghost, are visibly signed (yes, but also) sealed*. Baptism effects what it is signifies.

So, baptism is important, it is dramatic, *it changes things*. As the Article affirms, baptism is not just a sign of something. It actually does something. It changes our status with God. The point being that such an important and significant shift is poorly conveyed when just a few drops of water are sprinkled in a private ceremony in some shady corner at the back of the church. Again to say, such celebrations of the sacrament are completely valid. But we must also ask the question how do we expect *the radical change* baptism effects to take hold in the believer when it's celebration has become so timid and tame? It is easy to lose sight of just what exactly is at stake.

At Elwood Beach just before Christmas our little gathering could (I think) sense the importance of what was going on. Tossed about by the waves and speaking over the wind we were reminded that water is dangerous. It can be wild. Indeed, I even said at the time that even as water is a sign of new life, of regeneration, of sustenance and cleansing, it is also a sign of danger and indeed of death. We can drown in water. Saint Paul understood this. He says *in baptism we die to Christ*. In Baptism something is put to death in us. In baptism we do bury something, namely the old man, the sinful man. But that, only to be raised up to newness of life in Christ.

When we turn our minds to the Baptism of the Lord, in the way our sacramental celebrations can be timid and tame, so too can we imagine this scene. We can so sanitise it, rob it of its power, even. So just imagine, then, something of the context. The Jordan, the only major river that flows through the Holy Land. A busy, important place. Imagine the muddy banks. Imagine the crowds, the noise, the bustling. We know from the gospel record immense crowds came to see John.

But then there is also the wider context that the Gospel writer Luke places this scene, namely the ministry of John himself. Unfortunately, the gospel reading today skips over some aspects of John's preaching as recorded in this gospel. We hear that one *more powerful than I will baptise you with the Holy Spirit and with fire*. But then it goes on. *His winnowing fork is in his hand, to clear his threshing floor and to gather the wheat into the granary, but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire*.

Though baptism is rightly associated with water, in Luke's telling of the baptism of the Lord there are two references to fire! *He will baptise you with the Holy Spirit and with fire*, and, *the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire*. We might jump to an association of fire with the tongues of fire at Pentecost. But in fact it is an image of judgement. John seems to expect Jesus to be one who will bring the judgement of God to his people and to the wider world.

Into this proclamation and prophecy, then Jesus is baptised. So, in some ways, Jesus' ministry is in continuity with John's. But at the same time there is a marked difference. John himself sees his ministry as only one of preparation; that he is unworthy; that Jesus is greater than him; and that John's baptism foreshadows a more powerful experience. And later in this gospel we hear of John's own puzzlement about Jesus' ministry. *Are you the one who was to come, or should we expect another?* It gives clear indication that Jesus' ministry was unfolding in an unexpected way.

At the same time the note of judgment is still very much part of Jesus' proclamation. And it is this aspect of Jesus' teaching that makes so many uneasy. It confounds the Fantasy Jesus, the Imaginary Jesus, the Jesus of Wishful Thinking that is not based on the gospel record but has Jesus going around being nice to everyone and never having a hard or difficult word to say about anything. A Phony Jesus. But for the Jesus of the Gospels, there is an element of Judgment. And this only goes to highlight how serious his message is. The note of judgment into which Jesus is baptised reminds us that following him, being his disciples, is a serious business. Our own baptism is a serious business! And it is best if our rites and ceremonies convey that seriousness in some way. We take it all seriously because what Jesus offers us is nothing less than true life and ultimate hope. That is what all that language about the dove and the heavens opening, and the voice from heaven is seeking to convey. That Jesus is the One we can trust. He is the one who liberate his people. He is the one who will lead us through the waters to a new land of Promise. And that is worth taking seriously. Amen.