

Today we begin a short series looking at Baptism, Communion and Confirmation. Partly in preparation for admitting children to communion but also good to stop every now and again to remind ourselves of the importance of the sacraments, of baptism and communion, in our worshipping life. And so we start today with Baptism.

Well it is Trinity Sunday and the curate is preaching, I'm told it is a thing. Let the guy who has just come out of college try and explain the really hard stuff. John is not that kind of incumbent though, he wouldn't be so cruel. So instead, despite it being Trinity Sunday we aren't looking at the Trinity today. We are looking at something far less controversial – Baptism. I mean who could disagree about baptism. It's not like there is anything to fall out about is there? Well...sadly Christians have and do fall out about it. Indeed baptism has been called by more than one writer 'the water that divides'. So today we will explore this act. I'm not aiming to score points but to try, in a broken and imperfect way, because I am a broken and imperfect man to set out what I believe the bible teaches about baptism. There will be those of you who disagree with me, that's fine, but I hope we find that there is more that unites us than divides.

We start in our reading from John's gospel. Jesus and Nicodemus. The upstart carpenter from the North and the educated Rabbi, member of council. Nicodemus starts a conversation with Jesus not by asking question but by making a statement, he pays Jesus a compliment. In effect Nicodemus says 'no-one could do what you could do if they weren't from God'.

As is often the case Jesus doesn't respond directly instead he says: 'I tell you the truth, no-one can see the kingdom of God unless he is born again'. Nicodemus has seen that Jesus is of God. But Jesus tells him that recognising he is from God is not enough, in effect he says, 'it is not about whether God is with me or not, it is about whether you will acknowledge I am Gods son. And if you think I am whether you are prepared to be born again.' Jesus confronts Nicodemus with a question we have all faced. If Jesus is the Son of God what are you going to do about it? Jesus is clear with Nicodemus, if Nicodemus thinks Jesus is the Son of God he needs to be born again with water and the Spirit. Most commentators have taken this as Jesus referencing baptism in water and spirit. We spent last weekend looking at what walking in the spirit means so today we will concentrate on water without forgetting the Holy Spirit.

We will look at four aspects of baptism. First why we baptise, second we will consider what it signifies, third we will consider who should be baptised before finally thinking about how it changes us.

Firstly why? Why do this strange thing, either a group of well-dressed people see someone in a strange robe sprinkle water on a baby's head or, equally weirdly, three fully clothed people get into a body of water before seeming to make a half-hearted attempt at drowning one of them.

We do this strange thing for two reasons, because Jesus told us to and because Jesus had it done to him. In our passage this morning Jesus hints at baptism, 'be born again in water and the spirit'. He is explicit in the great commission – Matt 28:19 - Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Second we baptise because Jesus was baptised, Matthew, Mark and Luke tell us that Jesus was baptised by his cousin, John-the-Baptist, in the Jordan. We baptise because we are told to by Jesus and we baptise because we want to follow in the footsteps of Jesus.

If that is why we baptise we might rightly ask what is the point of baptism? Or to put it less bluntly what does it signify? Baptism is one of the two sacraments ordained by Jesus we believe that the bible teaches us that sacraments are 'outward signs of inward grace'. We believe that they are a sign and seal of something that God has already, by his grace done for us.

In that sense God doesn't need baptism, God knows the state of a human being's heart, he knows where we stand with him. Baptism is a sign for us, a mark for the church of those Jesus has marked for himself. And a mark for the baptised, a reminder of the thing that God has done for them and in them. Baptism is always a work of God, not of a human being. We baptise to sign and seal something that God has done for us, but what?

There are three things that baptism signifies:

First it signifies union with Christ, Paul tells us in Romans 6:3 that we are baptised *into* Christ into both his death and resurrection. Baptism by immersion symbolises this strongly you go down and are buried, you come up changed.

Second it signifies the forgiveness of sins. In Acts 2:38 Peter tells the Pentecost crowd: 'Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins.' Saint Paul tells us in Act 22:16 that after his conversion Ananias tells him to rise, get baptised so his sins might be washed away. Baptism is a sign of the purification of our souls of the sin that binds us. Baptism by sprinkling signifies this well, we wash the candidate.

Third Baptism signifies the gift of the spirit, Peter's tells the Pentecost crowd 'Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins. And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.' Baptism symbolises, seals and signs the gift of the spirit. We thought last week about this.

So far so good! Baptism signifies union with Christ, forgiveness of sin and the gift of the spirit. The next question is who should be baptised?

Baptism is God's sign which seals the blessings of the covenant to the individual Christian. In a similar way that circumcision was a mark of the covenant between God and Abraham so circumcision is a mark of the covenant between God and his church, established through Jesus. Believers are similar to Abraham, he believed and was then circumcised. We baptise adults who profess faith because we trust that baptism is a seal of the faith that they have proclaimed. It is a mark of the declaration they have made, a reminder that Christ has claimed them.

The Church of England baptises children. We believe the bible teaches us that our children are like Isaac, he was circumcised because of the promise to his dad, Abraham. As Isaac was circumcised as a mark of the covenant so we baptise our children as a mark of the covenant. We baptise children because of the promise to us that Paul speaks of in Romans 7:14. Saint Paul tells us our children are made holy by having a parent or parents who are part of the believing community. So we baptise them in the confidence that their faith will blossom as they are nurtured by the faith of that community because that is God's promise to them.

For me the strongest indication that we should baptise children comes in Mark 10:13-16. This episode is perhaps my favourite passage in the Bible, it's the only one I have on the wall in my study. In it children are brought to him, little children, the Greek suggests they are probably less than 7 years old. Jesus' actions suggest three reasons why it is right to baptise children.

First he welcomes them. An odd thing for a first century Rabbi to do. Children were usually ignored until they were useful. Jesus turns this upside down and says to those gathered 'these little ones are important'.

Second he tells those gathered that 'the kingdom of God belongs to such as these' v.14. Children, these little children are not only members of the kingdom, they are model members. We are to become like them if we are to inherit the kingdom. Why wouldn't you baptise someone who Jesus has said is a member of the kingdom of God?

Second he blesses them, in fact the Greek says he fervently blesses them. He prays God's blessings on them again and again. And what greater blessing than the assurance of salvation.

So, whilst adults are baptised when they profess faith as a mark of their membership of the covenant community. We baptise children because we are told that they too are part of that community, indeed Jesus tells us they are model members of it.

We have thought about why we baptise, we have thought about what it signifies, we have thought about who should receive it. Finally we need to think about how it changes us.

Baptism is about regeneration. Jesus tells Nicodemus you must be born again. To be born again is to have another life, a new life. With a new life you can do one of two things, either you live like you did before, or you learn from previous mistakes, follow a different lead, have different priorities. Jesus tells Nicodemus that God has given him His own son so that he might have eternal life. And that eternal life is available to Nicodemus if he believes in Jesus. It is this promise that baptism seals.

But what then? Well you can walk away, or it can change you. Our call, if we are baptised, is to appropriate, to inhabit, to live out our baptism. We are called to inhabit the spirit, to walk in the spirit and let him transform us. We are called to live the new life, the life re-born that Jesus calls Nicodemus too. And we can choose to do – or not to do – this whether we were baptised as adults or children. Our call as individuals is to live out the faith. And our call as church is to nurture the spirits call in others. To see them grow to maturity in Christ. We are to live as co-heirs of Christ.

We appropriate our baptism fully by participating in the worshipping life of the church. And central to that life is the meal we all the Lord's Supper. We believe the Bible teaches that all the baptised, whether adult or children, ought to be welcomed at the meal that reminds us of God's covenant with us. The baptised have received the seal and sign of God's grace on their lives. And so as Jesus did not turn children away as they came to him we should not turn children away when we join in the meal he gave us.

As Paul tells us in the Romans passage we heard read, that this might mean suffering, it might mean pain. But ultimately, whether in this life or the next we are promised a share in his glory. That is the wonderful promise that baptism seals. The challenge for us it to live it out to work out what it means to be marked with the wonderful seal that marks us as children of the living God.