

**Acts 8:14-17**

**Psalm 29**

**Luke 3:15-17, 21-22**

**Christ's Baptism and ours**

Sermon preached by Rev. Em. Prof. Robert Gribben

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A favourite image on Christmas cards is the three magi with their unsuitable baby-presents gathered at a safe distance around the manger. It is a kind of tableau, a vivid image placed before our eyes, and has been a favourite with artists. And we are right to gaze in adoration on the epiphany in the mother and child, remembering Whose Child he is. But since the magi were late, the western churches remember them after twelve nights if we observe them at all.

It's very different for Eastern Orthodox Christians, for whom cribs and magi are mere preliminaries and the focus is on the baptism of Christ, today's theme. You often see a photo in the media of the ceremony on the Bay where the bishop hurls a cross into the water and some swift swimmer rescues it. Anglo-Saxons look on this ethnic display with astonishment.

The word '*epiphany*' in Greek means a manifestation of God, and the Orthodox more precisely call it *Theo-phany*. In these moments, God is revealing something of Godself – in the birth of the Christ Child, in the young Jesus stepping down into the waters of the river Jordan.

Today we read Luke's description of the baptism. The same notably brief account appears in all four gospels. We meet the strange figure of John, later given the title 'the Baptizer' because that is what he believed God had called him to do – that, and scare the living daylights out of an already fearful and subject people. Our lectionary leaves out most of Luke's darker summary of the message (but so do the other gospels).

To be fair, John did preach about judgement – about the winnowing-fork and threshing floor, the separation of the grain and the burning of the chaff – but, unlike some modern preachers, he does not leave them without hope. The gospels use the same phrase for the first message of both John and Jesus: '*Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near!*' The first step for that crowd was to wash themselves in the Jordan.

But that's not the epiphany. That *follows* Jesus' baptism. There, a very striking tableau is revealed. Listen again:

*Now when all the people were baptized, and when Jesus also had been baptized/ and was praying, the heaven was opened, <sup>22</sup>and the Holy Spirit descended upon him in bodily form like a dove. And a voice came from heaven, 'You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.'*

Only Matthew records John's objection to Jesus asking for his baptism. Of course, the human being who uniquely shared the holiness of God had no need to repent – and Paul captures the reason, when he writes to the Philippians, '*Christ Jesus... though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness.*' Of course, he stepped into the water *with the slaves* who were certainly in that crowd.

But look at the actual epiphany: Jesus, standing in the water, praying to the One he called 'Abba, Father', as the Holy Spirit visibly descended on him, and God's voice was heard addressing Jesus: 'You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased'. An ikon indeed, God revealed.

We tend to think of the link of baptism with the Trinity being in Matthew's formula: Go, teach, 'baptize in the Name of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit', but the three-actor image in the other three Gospels makes this ancient doctrine just as clear. This was an event in the life of the fullness of God, the triune God of love. This is the key to the birth of all Christians, of the way the Church reproduces itself.

Our reading from Acts this morning shows that there was a period when the earliest Church was sorting the liturgical details out. Some simply baptised 'in the name of Jesus' (v.16). Some indeed 'had not even heard there was a Holy Spirit' (Acts 19:2). Luke-Acts is doing some necessary tidying up.

Now let me ask a modern question, a liturgical one in fact.

A moment ago, I added another facet to my words about water. Water cleanses, purifies, and gives health; it also slakes thirst and refreshes. But now add *birth*. We are conceived and grow in the waters of our mother's womb, and we are gently bathed. But then water is as dangerous as it is life-giving, as recent news about summer drownings attest.<sup>1</sup> All symbols have multiple layers of meanings; they catch the attention and open the eyes in fascinating ways and lead us into deeper understandings. An early writer called the font both 'womb and tomb'. Jesus left us *the Gospel and two sign-acts* which use physical elements, water, bread and wine. Sacraments.

Now, my question, perhaps an uncomfortable one.

What kind of epiphany accompanies our contemporary celebrations of baptism? In what ways does modern baptism proclaim the richness of its meanings? We usually achieve one: washing, but if our children came back from the bathroom after using three droplets of water, we'd send them back. It's hardly bathing and it's no threat to life. The dimension of cross is invisible. We are a long way from Jordan and the practice of the church for the first thousand years, evidenced in their generous fonts.

The change began as soon as the majority of Christians were adults. They naturally wanted their children to stand under the same gospel sign. And where there is a hope that children will be brought up in close connection with the faith, lived by their parents, I still think that is appropriate. Our present secular culture certainly does not assist that growing in faith as it once did; quite the opposite.

Our received *church* culture also became rather sentimental about babies, and baptism even became a social occasion, to be followed by a sherry party. But given that baptism of infants has almost totally disappeared from our society and churches, I want to suggest that rescuing baptism from all that polite custom, is necessary for evangelization and mission today. If we are a church planning for the future, we will be baptizing *adult* converts. I see few signs of that in the Uniting or other churches, except for Roman Catholics.<sup>2</sup> Our worship book, *Uniting in Worship-2* (2005) has adapted their program for our use, but it is largely ignored.

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<sup>1</sup> John promises that Jesus will baptize with fire (the Holy Spirit), and fire has this double meaning too: both the revivification of the bush and its modern devastation.

<sup>2</sup> The *Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults* (1976) is a process which arose from the research and teaching of the Second Vatican Council. It is sometimes called the 'Catechumenate'.

My point is not to dig up ancient rituals, but to recover the living symbols which served the church well until now; it has nothing to do with the amount of water used; the Holy Spirit is quite capable of working with three droplets or none!

The old ikons show little fishes swimming around Jesus, deep in the water. They are there because they have seen and felt and known the Christ of the epiphany and are reborn. They are *us*.

In the crowds around us here and now are grown-up, educated and self-aware human beings, seeking salvation, wholeness of life, for an alternative to the destructive philosophies of our time. There are also those who are none of those things, the marginalised, the neglected and the poor. For all these, the God of love gives the church the means to be '*transformed by the renewing of our minds*' (Rom. 12:2) in and through the experience of our faithful worship, by words, yes, but also in sacred signs, in the overflowing font and in the breaking of the bread.

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