

There's an old joke about a church down in the South of the USA having baptisms one Sunday, when the town's most notorious sinner walked into the building. "Brother," the pastor called out to him, "are you ready to find the Lord?" "I guess so," he said, and into the great big pool of water the pastor dunked the man under. He came up and the pastor asked, "Brother, have you found the Lord?" "Not yet" the man replied, and again he was dunked under, and again he came up to the same question, "Brother have you found the Lord?" "No, still not yet," the response came and finally the pastor dunked him under a 3rd time, and up he came to the same question, "Brother have you found the Lord?" The man cleared his face from water and answered, "Still not yet. But Pastor, are you sure this is where He fell in?"

What is baptism about? What does it mean? With Martin Luther we can say that it's about victory over death and the devil; forgiveness of sin; receiving God's grace & welcoming the Holy Spirit. We can say that it's about the Covenant which God has made with his people; when an infant is baptised, he/she is welcomed into the community of faith in a parallel way to the rite of circumcision dating back to Abraham.

But we probably don't all agree about baptism. I was told long ago that if you got 10 C of S Ministers in a room, you wld find at least 11 different views about baptism. I wld find it interesting to take a straw poll here today to see the varied practices we have here in AMS. How many of you are baptised? How many not? How many baptised as adults? As children?

Go back 4½ centuries & you'll find some sharp opinions: In 1646, Anglican critic Daniel Featley observed of the "Dippers" rampant in England: "They preach, and print and practice their Heretical impieties openly.... They flock in great multitudes to their Jordans and both sexes enter into the River, and are dipt after their manner with a kind of spell...containing their erroneous tenets.... And as they defile our rivers with their impure washings, so the presses sweat and groan under the load of their blasphemies."

These days, we recognise that people have different ideas & that the Bible is strong enough to tolerate that. But I want to focus on what the different ideas have in common & what that has to say to us, here, today in 21st Amsterdam?

I put it that way because the real question may be, "Does Baptism mean anything at all?" For lots of people today, baptism is neither powerful nor significant. Quite sweet, perhaps, moving in a way, but deep down it seems to many like an anachronistic initiation ritual of a bygone era or, perhaps, a strange ceremony occasionally tacked onto worship. So I want to suggest that it is very relevant today; in a world fractured & dislocated & fearful of the future, baptism speaks not only about continuity with the past, but more imp'tly about welcoming membership of a loving community of faith - & a lot more besides.

Firstly baptism speaks about the holiness of the physical. It was more than understandable that J the B was shocked at Js' arrival. Obviously, 'cos of his feelings of inadequacy or inferiority, but also 'cos Js did not need to repent. But Js stood there waiting for his baptism in solidarity with us. The

entire narrative of the Incarnation tells the same story: he went thru what we go thru. Like us, he was a physical being & that was good!

There have always been people who believed that physical things such as bodies & food & objects are corrupt & impure & part of the challenge of faith is to detach from all these things, 'cos the aim is to get towards spiritual purity. So ascetic people who go & live in remote monasteries & live v. frugally have been revered. There are still some 2000 monks on Mt Athos in Greece, for instance, also spurning female company.

But Js' baptism is an affirmation of the **goodness** of the physical; here we see Js identifying with us in our physical needfulness & affirming there **need be** no conflict btw the physical & the spiritual. Indeed, the physical is good.

I was impressed, when I was in Sri Lanka last year, at the reverence many people had for the **land**; there's s'th' holy about it. & animals, in Buddhist belief, are also sacred. The western idea that we can exploit the world & pollute it at will is alien to that. Scripture tells us that **the earth is the Lord's, & the fulness of thereof** & when God saw His creation, he saw that it was good.

So we need to get away from that dualistic idea that somehow living, working, eating & enjoying life is inferior to being a holy-willy. The centuries-long hysteria in the Church about sex & sexuality has not done anyone any favours. In identifying with us in baptism, Js hallows the physical & confirms the goodness of the body. It can, & shld be, a temple of the Holy Spirit.

Secondly, we are called in - welcomed, blessed, affirmed within the f/sh' of faith. We are God's beloved, who often feel ourselves to be outsiders. Many of us here today are outsiders - literally **buitenlanders** in Dutch, foreigners. Yet baptism proclaims that we are all insiders in the circle of God's grace - whether you're from Holland or Haiti or Hungary, we're inside the circle of God's grace.

No act of ours can nullify the grace of God, but sometimes we aren't positive enough about it. As we say "yes" to God's baptism each day of our lives, we become conformed to God's vision for us in new and wondrous ways. We may discover - along with Cornelius' household - new gifts of God's Spirit, enlivening and energizing us. We may discover with Peter that the baptism we experienced is a call to welcome all people in their wondrous diversity. We may with Jesus live joyfully and actively, sharing the grace we've received, out of the abundance of knowing we are God's beloved children. Again & again, the call on our lives is to **welcome** - not just to say, "Within these walls let no-one be a stranger"; no, **more** than that, within this f/sh' ev'one **is** my brother, my sister; we are all actively included in the circle of God's grace.

& to all of this, there is a very big "therefore". The apos PI does this again & again: he outlines the facts of the matter & then he says, "therefore" our response is... such and such. God didn't call his Church into being simply to populate heaven. Like Js, our response to baptism - whether we were baptised as adults or as ch'en - our response shld be like Jesus: bending our will to the will of God; enduring suffering for the sake of the Gospel; submitting to the death of our sinful self in order for God to raise up the new creation in us; humbling ourselves in repentance and, finally, opening ourselves to the work God seeks to do in us & through us...

Because - & this is by way of a conclusion - you have a vocation, a calling. Js' baptism marked the start of his earthly ministry. So in our baptism, God calls us into ministry. That ministry may well

start with your rel/sh's. Each child of God is called to be the best son or daughter, the best sister or brother, the best husband or wife, the best parent, the best friend, employee, citizen, and neighbour. Our ministry begins with those people that are already in our lives by virtue of our birth and where we live and work.

But as a Church we have a mission - to bind up the broken-hearted, to visit & to heal the sick, to preach the Gospel; to offer the light of love & truth to a world in pain and darkness. That's our shared mission, **shared** because we're baptised into the one body, the body of Christ. Christian baptism remains a radical, for some a controversial, event. It is not merely an excuse for a party, nor merely a command we fulfill or a membership requirement we must endure to enter the Christian church. It is an act which changes us deep within. Baptism is an act of faith, a celebration of grace, and an enactment of the Word of God. So the conclusion is a question, or a series of questions: in what way have you been living out your baptism? What is **your** mission, your purpose here? How can we better support those parents trying to be true to the promises **they** made at their children's baptism? &, for me, the most fraught & difficult: How can we show the deep meaning of baptism to a world that has lost **interest** in & all **knowledge** of these markers, these symbols, these sacraments? (All answers gratefully received!)