

The Baptism of the Lord Year B

Gen 1:1-5; Ps 29; Acts 19:1-7; Mark 1:4-11

I often caution my students to be wary of simple answers. Neat explanations as to why we do things the way we do are often invented to make sense of long-established habits and may well reflect attempts at meaning-making rather than the origins of a practice. Despite warning others, I'm as prone as anyone to repeating things that I've been told that make sense but might not be the whole truth.

Just recently I was confidently explaining to a group of students inside a traditional church how the placement of the font near the entrance was a symbol that our baptism is our entry into the Church and having it near the door of our church buildings reminds us of our baptism. Now this is a nice, neat explanation and I certainly do see a font near the entry to a church and think of my baptism

It's entirely possible, however, that the origins of this practice go back to ancient roman architecture and fourth century Christians adopting the design of the ancient basilica for their first public churches. This was certainly the explanation the same students got from another teacher a few days later, much to my embarrassment given my earlier warnings about easy answers.

As far as incomplete explanations go, I think focusing on the symbolism of the font near the entrance to churches is a pretty innocuous one. If any of us see the font near the door and are reminded that we are joined to the body Christ through baptism, I think that's a good thing. The architectural origins of the practice aren't important. In fact, if the only thing you remember from this talk is that we enter into the church through baptism, then I'd be pretty happy with that.

I did come across a simple explanation related to this morning's Gospel reading that I did have more of a worry about. In a cathedral's weekly newsletter (you'll be pleased to know it wasn't our cathedral) this Sunday three years ago was summarised by saying that Jesus was baptised so that he could he receive the Holy Spirit. Nice and simple but I'm pretty sure it's wrong.

Clearly the readings this morning strongly connect baptism with the Holy Spirit but the idea that Jesus needed baptism to receive the Holy Spirit strikes me as rather odd. I can't see how the second person of the trinity, incarnate through the power of the Spirit could possibly depend on baptism at the hands of a human prophet for the indwelling of the Spirit of God. Perhaps if I interpret this idea generously and take it to mean this was the method and moment God chose for a special empowering to come upon Jesus then it's less problematic.

Ultimately though I think any simple explanation of what's going on in this morning's Gospel reading will fail to do justice to the significance of Jesus' baptism. Undue attention to any one dimension of

this surprising act will impoverish our understanding. And it is a surprising act. At first glance, it makes little sense.

John's ministry was proclaiming the forgiveness of sins through repentance. He offered baptism as a symbol of this repentance. Jesus comes along and, as you'll remember from Matthew's version of this story, John has the same reaction as I think we all would. Jesus doesn't need to repent; we need to be repenting to Jesus.

Perhaps what's happening here is a continuation of what we've seen over Christmas and Epiphany. In Jesus, God so enters into human experience that Jesus is prepared to undergo this rite of repentance. The one human ever who lived without sin humbles themselves such that they accept baptism at the hands of a human like you and me. A surprising act indeed.

And then we have this image of the Holy Spirit coming onto Jesus like a dove. Again, the creative force that gave rise to the universe is found in the form of a gentle creature. The Gospel writers place this scene immediately before Jesus' public ministry and this naturally suggests that his baptism and the descent of the Spirit serves as some kind of preparation for the work ahead.

This aspect is perhaps the most direct parallel between Jesus' baptism and our own. Whether you were baptised as an infant or when you were, as the Book of Common Prayer puts it, of "riper years" your baptism is the beginning of your ministry. We are not admitted to the Church just to sit in services, our baptism is our commission to serve in Jesus' name.

This is a big ask, but just as Jesus did, Christians receive the gift of the Holy Spirit to empower our ministries. Now, different parts of the Church have different understandings of the precise nature and timing of this gift but I think it's safe to say that there is general agreement that baptism in water in the name of the Trinity and the indwelling of the Spirit are a normal part of Christian life.

Again, Christians don't have the Spirit dwelling in us just for our own benefit, we are empowered to be who we are called to be and do what we are called to do. The Spirit of God, the Spirit of Christ Jesus comes to us to conform us to the image of God found in Christ and to carry out God's mission in the world.

And so we come to the third remarkable event in this scene, the voice from heaven. I find this a little confusing. I don't think this is presented in the Gospels as a miracle in the same way that Jesus's healings, for example, are. It certainly seems like no one else heard it, or if they did it didn't seem to generate any response from those around the Jordan.

I wonder if perhaps Jesus' identity as the only begotten child of the God of Israel is, like the anointing of the Spirit, something to do with preparing for his ministry. Jesus' mission during his time on earth could only be done out of his status as God's child. God's plan for our salvation depended not on human initiative; it was God's action.

It might be that this clear statement of that identity was part of equipping him for the road ahead. I think this points to another parallel between Jesus's baptism and ours. As well as being baptised into the Church, we are baptised into Christ's death and resurrection. We are in Christ.

The depth of what it means to be in Christ takes a lifetime to being to comprehend. One dimension of this, however, is that we are adopted into a new status. As Christians, we are, in Christ, children of God. Now, we might not have necessarily heard a voice from heaven telling us this, but the testimony of the New Testament is clear, because of what God has done in Christ Jesus, we are God's children.

At this point you might be picking up a theme, but I want to say again that we are not made children of God in Christ so that we can sit around cosy in our newfound status. I'm convinced that we are given this assurance so that we can, like Jesus, step out in faith and so what needs to be done. Like God's only begotten child, we as adopted children, become part of God's plan for the world's salvation.

This language of adoption made more sense in its ancient near-east context. The household was the basic unit of production and children, primarily sons in that culture, would naturally be expected to be involved in the family business. When Jesus says "I must be about my Father's business" this was easily understood in his context.

So yes, we should be assured of our status as God's children, but we should also understand that we have been co-opted into the family business. We too have to be about God's business. And we can all do with reminding from time to time that it is God's work, not our work.

We don't need to come up with clever strategies arising from our own intellects. Rather we need to be attentive to work of God's Spirit, to notice where the Kingdom of Heaven is being built. The church is increasingly learning, a little too slowly in my opinion, that signs of the Kingdom are not going to be found solely within the confines of our institutions.

I'm certain that right now God is at work through the lives of people that would not consider themselves part of the institutional Church. Those of us who are, have a choice to make. We can ignore what's happening and carry on doing what we know. Alternatively, we might try to co-opt these workers of signs of the Kingdom, absorbing them into the institution until they behave in the ways that we are comfortable with, blunting their prophet edge.

This community has a track record of avoiding both of those pitfalls, working with those who are working for the good of the city. I don't know what this year will bring for St Luke's, but I am sure God is inviting us to participate in the work of the Kingdom in new ways.

My prayer is that we will be attentive to what God is up to, to signs of the work of the spirit in the world around us so that we can continue to be active workers in our family business. As we come and go from this place, I pray that the font would remind us not only of our entry into the church but also our entry into the work of the kingdom.