

Sermon for 8th January 2012: The Baptism of Christ – Canon Robert Innes

The Baptism of Mira Makipaa and Elijah David

We gather near the start of a new year. May I begin by welcoming everyone back to a new term and wishing you all a happy, healthy and peaceful 2012. And what lovelier way could there be to begin a new term in our church's life than to be baptizing two babies from committed church families. This is a special event in our church's life. I know it's an *exceptionally* special event in the lives of your families. The wedding of Sara and Arttu was disrupted by the volcanic ash cloud which prevented Arttu's family members from flying here to Brussels from Scandinavia. The wedding of Marika and Anu could not take place in continental Europe because of problems with paperwork and eventually took place in England at short notice. Here again, family from India were unable to attend. So for both families, this baptism service marks the first time when you have all been able to gather together to celebrate the union of husband and wife and the birth of a first child and grandchild.

It's appropriate then, on this Sunday, when our readings focus on the baptism of Jesus, and when we have just baptized two babies, to think together about the meaning of this event. We frequently have baptisms at Holy Trinity, but today is an opportunity to think a little more deeply about what the significance of these occasions. I invite us to do this under three headings: why baptize infants? what happens in baptism? and why is baptism important for grown-ups?

To begin at the beginning with the question 'why baptize infants'? You see, whilst we all agree that it is wonderful to celebrate and give thanks for a baby's birth, it is less obvious that babies ought to be baptized. The accounts of baptisms in the New Testament are typically of *adults*. Jesus was an adult when he was baptized. The fastest growing churches in the world today, the Pentecostal churches, don't baptize babies; Baptist and many evangelical churches don't baptize babies for good, conscientious reasons. In that light the continuing desire of churches like our own Anglican church to baptize infants needs justification beyond being a nice tradition, or as a way to meet great-grandma's promptings, or even because it's a useful covert strategy for evangelism.

I should say I am full of sympathy and respect for those who think it's better to baptize adults. The baptism of a someone who comes to faith as an adult is almost always a very powerful experience. But, at a personal level, Helen and I have four children and all of them were baptized as babies. And there are a number of reasons why I think baptizing babies is both right and biblical.

To start with, the defining sign of membership of God's chosen people, the Jews, was and is circumcision carried out on babies a few days old. If membership of the Old Covenant includes babies and children then it seems likely that God would want to include babies and children in the New Covenant too. It's certainly true that we don't have any eyewitness accounts of babies being baptized in the New Testament. But there are several accounts of whole households being baptized: Lydia's household, the Philippian jailer's household, and Crispus's household, for example. In those accounts, there's nothing to suggest a minimum age limit or that children were specifically excluded. And then the New Testament clearly expects that believers will

be baptized and that the baptized will believe. There's no indication of long waiting periods or training periods between the profession of belief and baptism. The New Testament just seems to have no category of trainee Christians or not well enough educated Christians or under-age Christians for whom baptism must be deferred for several years. Of course Christians disagree about this and there were no cameras to record those first baptism parties. But my own reading of scripture convinces me that children were almost certainly baptized in the first Christian decades and that this practice is consistent with apostolic teaching. So today, I baptize children not as a matter of tradition but as a matter of conscience and principle.

What then happens in baptism? At one level, Mira and Elijah have just been the passive recipients. They haven't expressed any particular spiritual experience...at a few weeks old or even six months old we would be silly to expect that. But at another level they've been the subjects of some extraordinarily powerful words and actions. In fact what we've done is nothing less hand them over, body and soul, to God. 'Christ claims you for his own.' The way the Bible puts it, they are like property that has been subject to a deed of sale and given to a new owner. 2 Corinthians 1:22 "God has set his seal of ownership upon us and put his Spirit in our hearts." When I invoked the name of God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit over them they were given irrevocably to God.

Now that could sound pretty threatening. One could imagine the human rights lawyers being concerned. And it would be, were it not for the fact that the God to whom they are pledged is also their creator, he is the one who is most deeply committed to their welfare and the one in whom they will find their deepest needs are met. To want independence from this God is folly, it is the cardinal sin. In baptism, Mira and Elijah are freed from sin and given a new liberty as children of God. And they now have a place they will always belong: with God and with his people the church.

Baptism enacts a kind of death and re-birth. As St Paul says in Romans 6:4, "We were buried with Christ through baptism so that we may also be raised with him to new life." Anu was telling me about the way baptisms are done in his native church, the ancient Melkite Church of Kerala in India. When babies are brought for baptism they are stripped naked. They are plunged into the font and submerged in water. Then they are brought up and clothed in a white garment. Unfortunately, they didn't train me how to do that safely at my British theological college. But it's dramatic symbolism and it depicts exactly the meaning of baptism: death to an old life of sin and rising to new life in Christ.

So I want to say that in baptism God is really at work, he makes something happen. He takes hold of a person, claims them for his own and links them with the death and resurrection life of Jesus. Now, let's be clear we don't suppose that this all happens by some kind of 'magic'. [The Catholic *ex opera operato* doctrine is sometimes suspected of this – though good Catholic theology as represented, for example, by Thomas Aquinas stresses that the efficacy of the sacraments depends on the disposition of the recipient.] Elijah and Mira will have to grow in faith and understanding so that they can appropriate the benefits of their baptism. Without a faithful response the far-reaching effects of baptism simply lie dormant. As the reformer John Calvin said, "a baptism where there is no faith is like rain beating on a hard rock" - nothing changes. To the contrary, baptism expects and calls for a dynamic interaction between God and

the baptised in which faith grows and a life changes. So Anu and Marika, Sara and Arttu will, I know, be looking at the different ways in which they can nurture their little ones in the faith: in their home – through story books, CDs, prayer-rituals; through the education they give whether at school or at home; and through encouraging their children to come to Sunday School and to develop the ability to worship and to pray for themselves. God is at work to awaken faith in these little children's lives and it is the parents and godparents responsibility to co-operate and enable this work, to the point where the children come to express a living faith for themselves. What happens in baptism is that God claims these children for his own and places them in a network of relationships, with Jesus, with godparents and with the wider church so that faith can flourish. The 'what happens' derives not from 'magic' but from this new relational context – because, at a deep level *who we are* is a matter of our relationships. It is our hope and expectation that the child formed out of these relationships becomes a person of faith. For the goal of baptism is a personal faith. That is the meaning of baptism.

Thirdly and finally, why is baptism important for adults? Churches that baptize infants have sometimes given the impression that baptism is something that happens when you are very little but which you then leave behind. The Anglican church used to conduct most of its baptisms as private family ceremonies. This gave the impression that baptism was very interesting to the parents and godparents, but of no particular relevance to the church – which was interested in more grown up forms of worship.

In fact baptism is not something that you *grow out of*, it is something that you *grow into*. Each of us, however long ago we were baptized, is still working out the meaning of what was done to us. That is why our church now requires baptisms to be held usually at the main service of worship. Because baptism is the foundational act of Christian life. It 's something none of us ever leaves behind. It is the basic spiritual event that binds us to God.

In today's service, all of us are reminded again of our calling and commission to fight valiantly as a disciple of Christ against sin, the world and the devil to the very end of our lives. That, of course, is a daily struggle. It's a struggle that Mira and Elijah are so far blissfully unaware, but which for us grownups is an all too normal feature of real adult life.

We meet today at the opening of a New Year. At least in economic terms, all the signs are that this isn't going to be an easy year for Europe. As regards the European currency, in terms of the stability of European banks, we can't be sure what might happen. For some of us that may have big implications. For all of us, a new year brings anxieties as well as hopes, the possibility of sorrows as well as joys. Martin Luther, who knew more battles than most of us – when he felt his enemies closing in on him, used to remind himself "I am baptized". Not "I was baptized" but "I am baptized". Luther turned to the objective fact of his baptism for assurance of his standing before God and for strength in the struggles of life. The reality of our baptized status equips us for life today, it isn't something that fades away with the photos of babyhood.

The hymn that we shall sing at the end of our service was written by a lady called Edith Gilling Cherry. Edith Cherry was born in 1872. She had the great misfortune to

contract polio. This left her partially paralysed and meant she could only walk with aid of crutches. At the age of 12 she suffered a stroke. She began writing poetry. At the age of 25 she suffered another and severe stroke from which she sadly died. Edith Cherry's life was at one level deeply tragic. But people remembered Edith as a young woman who was full of laughter and fun, as well as someone who had a particular gift for entering into the sorrows of others. Edith had an extraordinary faith, and she faced death with courage. Her biographer wrote: "those who have read the sweet poems written by this gifted young poetess might have been surprised had they met her. Her verses gave evidence of such deep thought, such wide sympathy, such spiritual insight; and yet she herself looked so youthful — indeed so childlike."

Well however tough 2012 is for us, it probably won't be as difficult as Edith Cherry's life. Her life is a remarkable testimony to God's ability to work through human weakness, and indeed of a woman's ability to stay faithful to her baptism through the most difficult circumstances. Edith Cherry wrote two volumes of hymns, and I'm going to finish with the first verse of her most famous hymn, which might be a suitable prayer for each and all of us at the start of a new year. Maybe as she rested on her crutches, she wrote these words:

We rest on thee, our Shield and our Defender;
We go not forth alone against the foe,
Strong in Thy strength, safe in Thy keeping tender;
We rest on Thee, and in Thy Name we go.

May Elijah and Mira, may we all know the Lord God is our strong shield and defender in days and months ahead.