

Sermon for the Baptism of Christ, January 9, 2022

When I was a student, I worked for a while as a call back chaplain at the hospital. Basically, I took a few after hour shifts and anyone at the QEII who needed a chaplain would call me, usually if someone was dying. Often no one did. One night I got a call that someone wanted to be baptised and could I come? I went, but I wasn't sure what I would do when I got there. Because it wasn't a baby they wanted to baptise, but an older woman, who was probably dying. And she was unconscious.

Now, in the Anglican Church, usually only priests, or possibly deacons, baptise, but in an emergency, anyone can perform a baptism, so I knew I could do it: it would be a valid baptism. But our normal form of baptism is in a church at a main Sunday service, after instruction. We might baptise a sick baby as an emergency, but we don't normally baptise adults who are unconscious. In fact, I've never heard of such a thing. So I was a bit nervous and undecided. I prayed a lot on the way to the hospital. Mostly for God's guidance.

It took me a while to get the story because the daughter was almost hysterical. The family were from mainland China and had grown up without any religion. However, the son had moved to Halifax (he was still an atheist) and the daughter had moved to somewhere in the US and she was actively involved in an evangelical church. The Mom, who was the one who was probably dying, had visited them both many times and had gone to the daughter's church. She had formed the intention of being baptised in her daughter's church that spring, after visiting her son. But while she was with her son, she collapsed and there she was in ICU. Unconscious. And I couldn't ask her what she wanted.

The daughter was begging me to baptise her, because she was afraid that her Mom would go to hell if she wasn't baptised. And also she wanted her to be able to fulfill this desire of her heart. The son confirmed that she had wanted to be baptised and was planning on it and said this is what his Mom would want. In the end, I agreed to do this. I was kind of nervous that the bishop or my profs would be angry with me because it was a pretty odd thing to do. But they weren't there to ask. The decision was mine to make, and I decided yes, I would baptise her.

I asked for some water and a towel and the nurse brought water in a Styrofoam cup. I remember thinking, well, it's better than one of those basins they use for who knows what. Of course, I wasn't ordained so I couldn't bless the water and I couldn't anoint her with chrism, even if I'd had any chrism. However, I said some prayers and then I baptised her in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, there in the ICU, in the presence of her Christian daughter, her atheist son and the nurse. And then I said all the prayers I could remember from the baptism service and we joined in the Lord's Prayer.

And you know something? In spite of the odd surroundings and the Styrofoam cup and my own lack of experience, something happened. I could feel the holiness of the occasion. I could feel the power of God working through me - almost too much for me to bear - and I knew beyond doubt that that woman had been joined to the Body of Christ. It was a truly sacred moment. Even the son felt it.

After I filled out all the hospital paperwork, I went and sat in the chapel. I found I was trembling, as that sense of God's power within me gradually faded. I also felt exhausted and I went home and slept. And by the way, I didn't get into trouble. But I knew beyond doubt that that woman was well and truly baptised, and that baptism is a powerful and holy thing, not to be taken lightly. I don't know what happened to that woman or her family after that. One problem with being a call back chaplain is that you don't get to follow up on people. But it had a profound effect on me.

You know, I wish I could convey this to the people who call me up and want to get their baby done. Or, more often these days, their grandbaby. People who believe that's the thing to do for a baby, like registering their birth and giving them a name and getting them their shots. Oh, yes, and christening them - making them Christian. These people have an idea that being Christian is generally about being a pretty good person and they're willing to bring their kids up to be pretty good people. But they have no intention of bringing them to church or getting involved in religion in any way. They basically see this as a service the church provides to people, a sort of blessing for the baby.

When Charles was a kid, his Dad, who was the priest in Coburg, Ontario, at the time, invited him to come along to the church one Sunday afternoon at 4 pm, when he was meeting a family to do a baptism. These were people little Charles had never met and never saw again. Back in those days, baptism was seen as a thing you did, and it was assumed everyone was Christian and could be baptised, whether or not they attended church regularly. Or at all.

And you know, I wish I could get through to these people how much they're missing. It's like someone has died and given their baby a million dollar inheritance. And they go to the trouble of accepting the money and putting it in the bank for the child, but then they forget about it. They say the child can decide for themselves when they grow up what to do about it, but they never even tell the kid it's there. There is such wealth there for them, if only they would use it.

Because what we are invited into, brought into, in baptism is what we read about today in Luke's gospel. When Jesus is baptised, the heavens open and the Spirit comes upon him like a dove and God's voice says, "This is my son, my beloved son. I am well pleased with him." This is the invitation and this is what happens when we're baptised. The Holy Spirit comes upon us and we are welcomed as God's children. We may not hear it, but God's voice is saying, "This is my child, my beloved child. I am well pleased with you."

The passage from Isaiah that we read today is like God's love song to Israel. God says, through the prophet, "You are precious in my sight and honoured and I love you. Do not fear for I am with you. I have redeemed you, I have called you by name (as we do in baptism). When you pass through the waters, I will be with you. The rivers shall not overwhelm you. The fire shall not consume you, because I, the Lord your God, am with you." He could be saying the same thing at a baptism and it would be so true.

Every human being (and for that matter, all of creation) belongs to God. God loves all of us whom he has made. We are all his children. But when we are baptised, we become his children in a special way. We are joined to the Body of Christ. We are joined to the Son of God, and we share his relationship with God. Jesus invites us to call God Father, as he did.

And, as we become part of the Body of Christ, so we become part of the church of Christ, which is Christ's body on earth. I hear people say, "I was baptised Anglican, or I was baptised Catholic," but you weren't, you know. You were baptised Christian. You may have been baptised in an Anglican Church, but that baptism doesn't make you an Anglican. It makes you a Christian, part of Christ's whole body on earth. The different churches are different expressions of that. Our style is different, but our membership in Christ is the same, wherever we were baptised.

When we are baptised, God commits to holding us, loving us, walking with us, forgiving us and filling us with his Spirit, dwelling within us, all our days and bringing us to eternal life with him in the end. When we are baptised, we are saying, "Yes! That's what I want!" "And this is what I am willing to do so I can fully live into this reality, fully experience it." And we make promises.

The promises we make in baptism commit us to following Jesus and obeying him as our Lord. They commit us to working within the church, as a full member of the church, to continue Jesus' work on earth, the work first of all of gathering to worship God and second to resist evil, proclaim good news, serve Christ in all persons, respect each person's dignity, work for peace and justice, safeguard creation. This is the work of the whole church and as baptised members, we are part of it. It is our work.

Exactly how this plays out for each of us, exactly what role we may play, is a matter for a lot of prayer and discernment. And it may change from time to time. Remember, the first thing Jesus did when he was baptised was let the Spirit drive him into the wilderness where he fasted and prayed for 40 days, and was tempted to go off in all sorts of unhelpful directions. And he didn't come out of the desert till he'd figured out exactly what God was calling him to do, and how, and what it would cost him. And till he'd said yes to that call.

And the essence of that call was to bring human beings to union with God. To reconcile us with God. To make it possible for us to enter into that same relationship with God that he has: "This is my beloved child. With you I am well pleased."

When I became persuaded that that woman in hospital deeply desired this, then I allowed myself to become the agent of God, to unite her to Christ and bring her into union with God. Whether she died then or whether she lived, her life was changed. She was a daughter of God and joined to Christ. As we are. God gives us so much. God even calls us to help him in his work here on earth, to act as his agents to do the sorts of things we promised in our baptism, the things Jesus did. To make things more the way God desires them. Every day of our lives, we are invited to enter more deeply into that relationship, to act more willingly as God's deputies in whatever way he calls us. And every time that we say yes and do those things, God is saying, "My beloved. With you I am well pleased."