

## **The Baptism of Christ**

**Wantage**

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Do you know where you were baptised, what type of font was used, who was present, have your godparents being important or marginal figures in the development of your faith. I remember my baptism well, I was 18 years old, studying history at university and had suddenly encountered real Christianity for the first time and was convinced that this was true and the most important thing in life. Prepared by the university chaplain I was baptised at Norwich Cathedral. If any of you have visited that particular cathedral you will know that the font is rather unusual. It is not a mediaeval font or a Victorian replacement but rather made of two huge bronze bowls which were previously used in chocolate manufacture. They were gifted to the cathedral by the confectionary company Rowntree Mackintosh after the closure of their Norwich factory in 1994. Whenever I've been in Norwich in the years since I've often made a mini pilgrimage back to that font and given thanks for the blessings my baptism has bestowed. Perhaps you too have had the opportunity to visit the place where you were baptised?

Today we celebrate the feast of the baptism of Christ, and we listened to St Mark's account of John the Baptist baptising people in the river Jordan, including Jesus. This is the key moment of Jesus beginning his public ministry in Mark's Gospel, and comes right at the beginning. Remember that Mark doesn't include the birth narratives, we jump straight to Jesus being an adult. Jesus chooses to identify himself completely with sinful humanity even though he has nothing to repent of due to his sinless nature. Moreover, it is within the context of his baptism that we hear of the holy spirit coming upon him in the image of a dove and the assurance of his Heavenly Father's blessing.

It should come as no surprise then that baptism has been considered an essential part of the Christian life. Indeed the collective teaching of the New Testament is that baptism is, in normal

circumstances, a matter of salvation.<sup>1</sup> In our Anglican tradition this central place for baptism is expressed in the XXVII article of religion, which you will find at the end of the Book of Common Prayer. It says,

Baptism is not only a sign of profession, and a mark of difference, whereby Christian men are discerned from others that be not christened but it is also a sign of Regeneration or new Birth, whereby as an instrument, they that receive Baptism rightly are grafted into the Church; the promises of forgiveness of sin, and of our adoption to be the sons of God by the Holy Ghost, are visibly signed and sealed; Faith is confirmed, and Grace increased by virtue of prayer into God.<sup>2</sup>

In other words, baptism is a sacrament in which an inward and spiritual grace is brought about by the external signs and ministry of the church. It is not a matter of indifference, but rather one of central importance. In baptism we, like Jesus, offer our whole selves to God or as parents we do so on behalf of our child. This giving is total since we believe that in baptism we put to death our old selves and our reborn to life in Christ. In baptism we are united to Christ in his life, death, and resurrection by becoming part of his body which is the church. As the Venerable Bede put it, 'baptism opens the gates of heaven'.<sup>3</sup>

It would be easy for us to forget about the central place of baptism in our lives as Christians, after all unless we are attending a baptism ourselves it may not occupy our thoughts. Perhaps I could suggest that this feast of the baptism of Christ is a wonderful opportunity to return to the promises we made or were made on our behalf. How often do we look at them and use them as a subject for our prayer; are we living the kind of life of faith that we promised God? If we are a godparent perhaps there is an appropriate way we could reach out to our godchildren and re-commit ourselves to praying for them if we have let that slip over time.

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. John 3.5, Acts 2.38, 1 Pet. 3.21, Rom. 6.4, Mark 16.16.

<sup>2</sup> XXVII Article of Religion *Of Baptism*

<sup>3</sup> Quoted in A. Davison, *Why Sacraments?* (London: SPCK, 2013), p.19.

Jesus's baptism marks the beginning of his remarkable ministry of teaching and healing which led to the cross and his resurrection. Through his grace God invites all of us to share in that salvific act and gives us the very ordinary but essential element of water to convey that grace to everyone who is open to receiving it. Today let us give thanks for our baptisms as we recall our Lord's baptism and pray for the renewal of the celebration of this sacrament in the life of God's Church.