

Baptism of Christ

St. Brandon's

Acts 8:14-17; Luke 3:15-17,21-22

13th January 2019

Today, as we've seen, is the feast of the Baptism of Christ. It is also the Sunday when, in keeping with that feast and at the beginning of the New Year, we have the opportunity to renew our baptismal vows, something we have done for a number of years now. So I want to try to link from the readings, specifically the reading from Acts and the Gospel reading from Luke, to the renewal of our vows. At the same time, I hope there's something here for any for whom the renewal of baptismal vows isn't appropriate. Don't switch off yet!

Baptism seems to be a specifically NT ceremonial act, something initiated by John the Baptist. One interesting thing about John the Baptist is that he apparently conducted his ministry on the eastern side of the river Jordan in the territory of Herod.¹ This meant that those who came out to him had to cross the river from Israel, from the Promised Land, in order to hear his preaching and instructions. So they were called out of the Promised Land to repent and be ritually baptised. They then had to cross westward, back into the Promised Land, thereby repeating the journey their ancestors had made under Joshua when, as a nation, they first came to the Promised Land after their wandering in the wilderness. So that might be a first helpful way of approaching the renewal of our baptismal vows, by thinking of it as a journey, where we are called first out of our comfort zones across the Jordan, called once we are there to repent of our sins, and then, in a repeat of the journey we made when we were first baptised, invited to cross back into the Promised Land, into the now familiar territory of faith.

After Jesus had been baptised we know that two things happened. First, that the heavens were opened and the Holy Spirit descended on Him like a dove – I'll come back to that in a moment. Second, that a voice came from heaven affirming that He was God's Son with whom the Father was well pleased. And as we know that has become for us probably the key way of understanding the relationship between God the Father and Jesus, God the son. But that idea then, of course, links to our status before God. John says in the prologue to his gospel: "But to all who received him [Jesus], who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God" (1:12). And Paul picks that up, and links it to the work of the Holy Spirit, when he says, "For all who are led by the Spirit of God are children of God ... and if children then heirs, heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ" (Romans 8:14-17). Elsewhere, Paul refers to us as *adopted* children of God²: "God destined us for adoption as his children through Jesus Christ, according to the good pleasure of his will, to the praise of his glorious grace that he freely bestowed on us in the Beloved" (Ephesians 1:5-6). And we sang much the same in the last hymn: "You are mine, O my child, I am your Father, and I love you with a perfect love."³

So, a second helpful way of approaching the renewal of our baptismal vows might be to think of it in terms of the status of adopted children that it confers on us, with all the benefits which that brings including, of course, life beyond this life. That might also remind us that the initiative is, as always, with God; that while we have to put ourselves in the right place, we are not required to, indeed we cannot, earn our own salvation. We just need to rest in the grace of God, accept the amazing status of being adopted as God's children; remind ourselves again that we have crossed into the Promised Land at God's initiative and at the

¹ This is taken from Angus Ritchie's commentary in the *Church Times* of 11 January 2019, where he draws on Tim Gray's book *The Luminous Mysteries: Biblical reflections on the life of Christ*.

² For another example, see Galatians 4:5.

³ 'Do not be afraid' by Gerard Markland. No.111 in *Hymns Old and New*.

good pleasure of His will; remind ourselves again that He delights in us, just as He did in Jesus at His baptism.

So, first called out of our comfort zone and called to repent, and second then reminded of our unearned status before God as His adopted children. And then there is the Holy Spirit. We see how the Holy Spirit is intimately connected with baptism. John the Baptist says that he baptises with water but that the one who is coming, i.e. Jesus, will baptise with the Holy Spirit and fire. Jesus is then anointed with the Holy Spirit at His baptism, as we've seen. Jesus, however, doesn't seem to baptise others during His ministry, at least not in the way John had, but He does say to Nicodemus in John's gospel that, "no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit" (3:5), implying the necessity of baptism and the baptism of the Holy Spirit. And, of course, in the great commission at the end of Matthew's Gospel Jesus instructs His disciples to go and "make disciples of all nations, baptising them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit" (28:19).

So baptism and the Holy Spirit always go together, right? No baptism, no Holy Spirit. Be baptised and the Holy Spirit is given automatically. Well, but it's not quite as simple as that. As we see in our reading from Acts, the people of Samaria had been baptised in the name of the Lord Jesus, but the Spirit had not yet come on any of them, and it took the intervention of two Apostles, Peter and John, for the Spirit to be given after the laying on of hands. That's, of course, where we get Confirmation from – having been baptised by a run-of-the-mill vicar, it takes the laying on of hands from a bishop in apostolic succession to confirm the giving of the Spirit: "Confirm, O Lord, your servant N with your Holy Spirit". Well, but it is *confirmation* not initiation – we say in the Baptism service as the priest prays over the water: "Now, Father, we ask you to bless this water, that those who are baptised in it may be cleansed in the water of life [which links to repentance], and, filled with your Spirit, may know that they are loved as your children [which links to being adopted children], safe in Christ for ever." So that prayer over the water assumes that the Spirit is given at baptism.

Compare that, however, with another episode in the Book of Acts where Peter is called to the house and household of Cornelius and, having proclaimed the gospel to them, "the Holy Spirit fell upon all who heard the word", so that Peter says "Can anyone withhold the water for baptizing these people who have received the Holy Spirit" (Acts 10:44-47). So there the Holy Spirit was given first and baptism followed.

So, what are we to make of all this? I remember doing something on baptism in a God Spot with the Youth Club, only for Martin to say, "So you can't be a Christian and receive the Holy Spirit unless you're baptised?" "Well, no it's not quite as simple as that, Martin." "Oh! So if the Holy Spirit can be given without baptism, what's the point of baptism?" Thanks Martin.

But, of course, Martin was helping to tease out an important point. God, the Holy Spirit, doesn't work to a formula. Baptism and the giving of the Holy Spirit don't automatically go together. So maybe what was going on in our reading from Acts was that, after the baptism of the people of Samaria there was no immediately discernible manifestation of the coming of the Holy Spirit, and it took the arrival of the apostles, and their blessing of the believers, for the presence of the Holy Spirit to become apparent. Perhaps it was that they needed something to open them up to the work of the Holy Spirit even though He was already present in their lives.

And maybe that's a third helpful way of approaching the renewal of our baptismal vows. I guess most of us would acknowledge that we are not as open to the Holy Spirit as we could be. That's not to say that we don't have the Holy Spirit. The best answer to someone who says, "Well, you're not much of a Christian, are you?" is to invite them to imagine what you would have been like if you didn't have the Holy Spirit! The Holy Spirit is already present and active in our lives if we believe, whether baptised or not, but He may be

struggling to have much effect because we won't let Him. There is, perhaps, little immediately discernible manifestation of the presence of the Holy Spirit within us. Perhaps today, as we renew our baptismal vows, would be a good time to open ourselves anew to the refreshing, though also scary, work of the Holy Spirit, who doesn't work to a formula. That too might be part of making the journey out of our comfort zones, while we can still be reassured of our permanent status as adopted children of God.

Amen