

Baptism

Romans 6:3-11

Easter Vigil 2018

Now and again I get a phone that begins something like this,

Can we book a date for a christening please?

Inevitably I have to explain that it is a little more complicated than that; that 'booking a christening' involves establishing a relationship with a congregation, is a process rather than an event. 'Booking a christening' is not quite how I understand baptism.

But equally well most new parents would not share in St Paul's understanding. Never, to date, has a new parent phoned me to ask 'Can we arrange for our new baby to share in the death of Jesus please?'

Now I have to admit that there are some writings of St Paul where I feel I have to talk sensitively about cultural context and about St Paul writing for a particular time and place. But his teaching on baptism is not one of them. The notion that in baptism we die and are born again is one that the whole church has taken on board and made part of its core belief and teaching. So much so that if someone were to ask me, 'have you been born again', I would answer without hesitation, 'Yes, on 9th March 1958 when I was baptized at the age of three months.'

Now in saying that I am courting controversy a little. Being 'born again' has come to have very particular meaning. In fact those who call themselves 'born again Christians' do not mean by 'born again' that they are baptized. They mean something a little different. They mean that they have made a personal response to Christ, they have consciously said 'yes' made a decision to follow him and, very possibly, had a strong sense of conversion. They use the phrase 'born again' in a subjective sense.

Those who do not belong to this school of thought can respond in one of two ways. Some people assert that this being born again is simply unnecessary, that they are not born again and that is the end of it.

Others, including myself, will assert that the idea of being born again actually refers to the objective process of being baptized.

There is something important here. The truth is that baptism, like all the sacraments, has an objective side and a subjective side. Or, to put it another way, there is what God does and there is what we do. Both matter. But let us begin with what God does. Paul is very clear: all who share in Christ Jesus by being baptized also share in his death. When we were baptized we died and were buried with Christ. He does not say 'when we were converted' or 'when we made a decision for Christ' but 'when we were baptized'. This is a very high view of baptism: you may have been just a few months old when you received it but on that day God gave you something very precious. One of the reasons we have holy water in church and why we bless this water today is that we want to be reminded of this wonderful gift from God. Its real.

But with any gift there is response – and there is also preparation. If someone gives me a present I always say 'thank you.' And the giving of a gift usually takes place in the context of a relationship with that person. I am rarely given a gift by a complete stranger. So, receiving the gift of new life in baptism requires preparation, either of the candidate if he or she is an adult, or of the parents. Baptism preparation has often focused in teaching, on what the candidate knows. May I suggest that what matters more is who the candidate knows and the 'who' is Jesus. And Jesus is known through a particular congregation, the body of Christ. Therefore sharing in worship is the key preparation, not classes to impart intellectual knowledge.

The response to baptism, like the response to any gift, is gratitude, gratitude for a new life and a willingness to seize it and use it. If my wife bought me a new CD player for my birthday and I left it in the packaging and put it in a cupboard, she would be very disappointed. So if we do the same with the gift of life in baptism Jesus himself will be grieved. What he wants is that we live the new life, a life in which we have been freed from slavery to sin, imprisonment by the devil.

The words spoke by the priest before baptism are quite dramatic:

Christ claims you for his own.
Receive the sign of his cross.

And

Do not be ashamed to confess the faith of Christ crucified.

The response of the congregation is

Fight valiantly as a disciple of Christ
against sin, the world and the devil,
and remain faithful to Christ to the end of your life.

And the priest pronounces the final exorcism,:

May almighty God deliver you from the powers of darkness,
restore in you the image of his glory,
and lead you in the light and obedience of Christ.

For some people the idea of being set free from the power of Satan's grasp may feel very real; others may prefer the idea of being delivered from sin. But for those who do not respond readily to either concept there are other ways of looking at it. Perhaps what I need to be set free from are my genes. Perhaps I am genetically disposed to be dishonest, or grumpy or melancholy. The Good News for me is that through being born again in baptism I do not have to be a slave to my DNA. Or perhaps my parents were not perfect; perhaps I am anxious or over bearing because of the way I was nurtured. The Good News of being born again is that my upbringing goes not have to determine my whole life. In fact being born again in baptism turns out to be a very practical experience.

Perhaps a useful exercise for every one of us this Easter is to reflect on what are the bad influences that we carry around with us, inherited either through our genes or learnt through our nurture. Acknowledge them confront them, look them in the eye, and tell them that you have been claimed by Christ, that Almighty God has delivered you from the powers of darkness, has restored in you the image of his glory, and is leading

you in the light and obedience of Christ. Live in the freedom of Christ's love.

N Clews

31st March 2018