

Baptism of Christ – 12 January 2025

Message – Growing into our baptismal promises

Creator, Redeemer, and Giver of New Life, help us to see with your eyes, and to embrace your gifts. **Amen.**

Many of us do not remember our baptisms. For those of us who have taken on the promises of baptism in believers' baptism or confirmation – the confirmation of the Holy Spirit upon us by a bishop – even this may be a little vague in our memory. Given how important we say baptism and the promises of baptism are, this is a little odd. Perhaps, it is one of the reasons for our marking the Baptism of Christ with such intentionality. We need reminding.

The ritual washing of baptism is rich in symbolism. It is a sacrament of our church, a mystery that allows us to become a part of the mystery of Christ. The other sacrament of our church is the meal of the Eucharist.

In baptism we are washed clean both visibly and invisibly. Water represents both life and death and the word chosen in the Greek carries this tension and could be used for both washing and drowning. In Genesis chapter one, the breath of God, God's spirit, that hovers, over the water, we are brought right to the start of our salvation history and reminded of the dove that hovered over Christ when Christ prayed sometime after being baptised.

My initial theological training was at joint Anglican-Baptist theological college, two colleges, one faculty. One of the most significant theological debates between the denominations is believer's baptism. For Baptists, a person

must be able to clearly articulate their faith for them to be able to be baptised. Without that articulated faith, Baptists do not consider it baptism. In their eyes, those of us baptised as infants have not been baptised.

This understanding of baptism causes some Anglicans to become Baptists and a few Baptists to become Anglican. At its heart is the serious question of what we think baptism is and does. As a sacrament, it has the power to join us with Christ. I am less certain that it always does this. It is not some kind of magic that indelibly marks us as a part of the body of Christ. Faith is a necessary.

I am on some fraught theological ground in saying this. As a sign and vehicle of God's grace some would argue that baptism always has a transformative effect. At which point, I will point to the letter of James and that we need both faith and good works and the faith without good works is dead. Or Jesus's little story about the two brothers asked to go to the vineyard.

When we look at the significance of baptism in the New Testament, we find that unites us with Christ in his death and resurrection, it washes away our sin, it gives us the gift of the Holy Spirit and gifts and fruits of the Spirit, it makes us a part of the body of Christ, the Church, and it makes us a part of the eternal Kingdom of God. For one short ceremony that is quite a lot of gifts.

If we now do the same exercise for the significance of faith in the New Testament, we will find that it also offers us all of those gifts. In the New Testament There is an assumption that faith and baptism are intertwined. That one

is in the close proximity of the other. You won't have one without the other. But it is not an automatic connection.

Not least because God is not bound by such things. Luke's Acts of the Apostles tells us of people who are baptised and who have not received the Holy Spirit and of people who have received the Holy Spirit and not been baptised. A delay between baptism and coming to faith or coming to faith and being baptised is no obstacle at all to God.

Entering the mystery of Christ through the human activities of faith and baptism is founded on God's grace, forgiveness, and love. God reached out to us before we reached out to God. Perhaps, in infant baptism we are acknowledging that God leads the way and lights the path for us to follow where in believers' baptism we may be emphasising the need for a faith response. Both are a part of the story; God offers us salvation and leaves us free to accept it, or not.

Every time we reflect on our baptismal promises, which we will be doing shortly, we perceive new things about the promises that we have made or that were made for us. As Christ prepared to leave them, Christ called the disciples friends. In baptism, we too have become friends of Christ.

Friendships are not static. They change over time as we change and the world around us changes. So, it is in our journey of friendship with Christ. Our perspective and understanding are every changing. And it is not a linear progression. Friendships go through good and bad times.

We are certainly not perfect friends and, while Christ is always the perfect friend, that does not mean that we are not given opportunities for growth and development, which

we do not always gratefully receive at the time.

Reflecting on our growing friendship with Christ, we will over time see a deepening of faith. Our faith, beliefs, life and love are slowly transformed. Those of a mature faith may be able to look back at their less mature selves with some degree of entertainment. They may even ask themselves, 'how was I ever like that?' or 'how did I ever believe that?'

Hopefully, we can all be kind to our former selves and learn from our past selves. Probably the most important lesson is humility, we are all a work in progress.

The notion of growth and a journey with God raises the challenging question of when we have enough faith to take on the promises of baptism for ourselves, whether in believes' baptism or confirmation. If our friendship with Christ is always growing, so to is our understanding of the nature of the promises of baptism.

This process of growth suggests there is no clear point at which we can take on those promises. Every step of our journey through life, we are able to take on a little more of the way of Christ. No one can say how much is enough that we leave for God. In Christ, all are welcome.

As we journey with Christ through the coming week, may Christ open our eyes to the gifts that are before us, continue to transform us and reveal the image of God in us, and equip us to support one another in our journey.
Amen. Amen.