



## Revd Ro's Reflection on The First Sunday of Lent

**1 Peter 3.18-22**

**Mark 1.9-15**

I have looked at the meaning of Lent in my Reflection for Ash Wednesday. This week's Reflection is for the first Sunday of Lent and during my Reflections I have always tried to highlight the connection between the readings. This week the connection is baptism.

I think one of the favourite things I do is to conduct baptisms. During the pandemic I have not been able to, but I look forward to baptising three babies when I return to church. I distinctly remember the first baptism I conducted as a deacon many years ago and the joy of everyone who took part in it. It was within the Holy Communion service. I think the congregation were concerned in case I dropped the poor little thing in the font because as they said, 'You haven't had a lot of experience around babies!' All was well and I have a lovely picture of the event.

St. Leonard's east window has three images, the nativity, the crucifixion in the centre and to the right as you look at it, the baptism of Christ, dealt with in our gospel reading for today. It is really lovely to conduct a baptism with this image in the background. It is the same Holy Spirit which descended on Jesus at the Jordon which is present at any baptism.

It is very appropriate that this, the first Sunday in Lent, has baptism as its theme. Our reading from 1 Peter focuses on baptism. It is highly unlikely that the author was Peter the disciple. This book was written for Christians in Asia Minor and they are referred to in 1:1 as "exiles of the Dispersion". They are "elect resident aliens" scattered throughout Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia, and Bithynia. The people addressed were suffering great persecution. If we look at the first verse 'Peter' says. 'For Christ also suffered.'

He is at pains to point out that at Calvary Jesus made the ultimate sacrifice, once for all. He took the sinfulness of humanity upon him and was victorious over death and sin reconciling people to God, cleansing them from sin. Peter then turns to the resurrection, the central fact of our belief. Jesus died and rose from the dead.

Peter makes the connection to Noah, he and his family were righteous and were saved by the action of God and they passed safely over the flood. It is water, says Peter, that will save you now. That is the water of baptism.

Our gospel reading is Jesus' baptism at the Jordan and we looked at this passage in detail at 'The baptism of Christ,' during the Epiphany season.

John is in the wilderness; he is the one who is the herald of Jesus, the one who will 'Prepare the way of the Lord. John certainly causes a stir, people flock to him, <sup>5</sup> 'And people from the whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem were going out to him, and were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins.'

Jewish baptism was about cleansing from sin and purification. This is what John does; the purification is washing away sin symbolically through water.

Look at what I Peter says. <sup>21</sup>'and baptism, which this prefigured, now saves you—not as a removal of dirt from the body, but as an appeal to God for a good conscience, through the resurrection of Jesus Christ,'

Yes Christian baptism does wash away sin, but it means so much more. The baptism of John and the baptism in the name of Jesus Christ are different. John himself says.

'The one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to stoop down and untie the thong of his sandals. <sup>8</sup>I have baptized you with water; but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.'

That is the point in a nutshell, this is the key. John baptises with water of repentance, the Messiah will fill people with the Holy Spirit of God.

If you remember the passage we looked at on the Baptism of Christ from Acts 19. Paul comes upon a group of Christians from Ephesus who had been as they said 'baptised by John's baptism.'

To Paul's question, 'Did you receive the Holy Spirit when you became believers?' they reply, 'No we haven't even heard that there is a Holy Spirit.'

It is hard for us to envisage now perhaps but these were people in a completely different culture that had heard of this new belief then called 'The Way.' They certainly knew of John the Baptist. They believed in his baptism for repentance but their understanding of Jesus and Christianity and the promises of God were, to say the least of it, totally undeveloped. They were probably actually really ignorant of it. But they do desire to follow the new way and that in a totally hostile environment and culture. How wonderful then is this meeting with Paul.

The baptism Paul baptises is that of Jesus Christ, no one else. That must be made clear to them. He explains exactly what John did, he baptised for repentance of sins, to prepare the way for Jesus, but he does not give the Holy Spirit. Only baptism in the name of Jesus the Messiah who is part of the divine God can do that. That is exactly what John said when he was baptizing as we have just seen. So Paul baptises them in Jesus' name and we are told, 'The Holy Spirit' came upon them.'

That is what I wrote then and it really does explain the nature of Christian baptism. Baptism is in the name of the triune God, as Peter says in the reading

‘Jesus Christ, <sup>22</sup>who has gone into heaven and is at the right hand of God, with angels, authorities, and powers made subject to him.’

Baptism is the central theme for the First Sunday in Lent and rightly so. At the dawn of Christianity, the first people to follow Jesus’ way would have been baptised perhaps as families or individuals with little formal instruction.

If you imagine a fledgling church, planted in a cosmopolitan area within a culture alien to it, if you think of it existing by the side of all sorts of religions and philosophies, you have a church under pressure, pressure and danger, not just from persecution but from infiltration by alien ideas. Put another way from the growth of teaching which was not the true meaning of Christianity and particularly the regarding the nature of Jesus and what he achieved for humanity.

Just look again at Paul’s words to the group of Christians in Ephesus,

To Paul’s question, ‘Did you receive the Holy Spirit when you became believers?’ they reply, ‘No we haven’t even heard that there is a Holy Spirit.’

As the church grew and developed a more formal education had to be established to combat various heresies and misunderstandings. New Christians had to understand the beliefs of the Christian church.

So prior to baptism, a course of instruction was introduced, it would have been fairly fundamental at first but gradually developed and became formalised. Of course then the candidates for baptism would be adults.

Those who were instructed would begin their learning prior to baptism. Baptism would take place on Easter Eve and the newly baptised would be welcomed into the church on Easter morning, the day of great celebration of Christ’s resurrection. They had died to sin and been raised to Christ as members of his body and they would be made one with Christ their head. Therefore their course of instruction would be intensified during the period of Lent. These new Christians were learning the faith so they were called ‘catechumens’ the word catechesis is instruction. We get the word ‘catechism’ from it.

Also during the period of Lent they would be expected to fast, to pray and give alms. Those were the topics Jesus dealt with in our gospel reading last week. It would be a period of learning and austerity. The other members of the church would also prepare themselves for Christ’s resurrection by fasting and prayer. The period of Lent as I said before really reflected Jesus’ forty days in the wilderness and we can see how our Lenten practise has been shaped.

The baptism itself would be by full immersion and then then at the great festival of Easter the newly baptised would take their place within the church.

Nowadays infant baptism is general, so the instruction or preparation is given to parents and God parents who make the promises on behalf of the child. It is at confirmation that the candidate can ‘confirm’ those promises made for them. It was prior to my confirmation that I received my first formal instruction in Christian belief. I can remember the priest teaching me that a sacrament was, ‘an outward and visible sign of an inward and spiritual grace.’

The two biblical sacraments are baptism and Holy Communion. Baptism experienced by Jesus at the Jordan and the Holy Communion which he instituted at the Last Supper. They are the fundamentals of Christian faith and practise.

<sup>9</sup> 'In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. <sup>10</sup> 'And just as he was coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on him. <sup>11</sup>And a voice came from heaven, 'You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.'

This is the loving God pouring out his love on the beloved. I think this is the image of God we should keep in mind. It is after his baptism when strengthened with God's Holy Spirit that Jesus goes out to face the trials in the wilderness.

During Lent we too focus on prayer and preparation. Lent courses reflect the period of learning. We focus on our own lives and bring them closer to Jesus' way. We are surrounded by the love of Jesus and thank God for his strengthening Spirit with us.

*'I will go Lord if you lead me, I will hold your people in my heart.'* Dan Shutte

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