



Sunday 24 January 2016
Septuagesima
Choral Evensong
2 Kings 5 vv. 1–15a
Mark 10 vv. 13–16

Baptism: A sacrament of boundary drawing

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This term's sermon series at St. John's chapel is about the sacraments. The sacraments are gifts from God which enable ordinary physical things – water, oil, bread, wine – to take on a new significance, places where heaven meets earth in the everyday physical actions of eating and washing. I became fascinated with one of the sacraments, the sacrament of baptism, shortly after I was ordained. Before every baptism, I visited the families and heard their stories – and I was amazed at the rich religious life of these families who, more often than not, I had hardly ever actually seen in church. Some prayed every day with their new babies, some talked about much they valued the Church and their Christian faith. Some took it more seriously than others, but none did it without any thought. Baptism is no longer a social requirement for most people - so those who still seek baptism for their children are making a positive choice. One baptism has particularly stayed with me.

The church I was working with at the time had a policy that baptism families should have a home visit and attend a rehearsal in church. Occasionally people would fail to engage in this process, and their children's baptisms would be delayed or cancelled. One family was in danger of this, as they had failed to come to the rehearsal and had missed appointments, but I decided to give them a last chance and made another appointment to visit them. The couple were not yet married, in their late teens. The baby's father spoke to me passionately about how important baptism was. He said 'we've always been church people – it's really important to us'. I had never seen any of them at church; perhaps I had missed them – but to be honest they would have struggled to fit in if they had come. I was somewhat dubious about how important to them it really was. I asked them if they wanted any special readings or prayers. And the baby's father asked that we include the Lord's Prayer, saying he says it every night in his prayers. I was still somewhat sceptical, until he told me he had a tattoo of the Lord's Prayer. And then he offered to show me, and before I had a chance to think he was taking off his shirt (which was a little shocking!!), and I saw, tattooed, large over his whole back, a rather beautiful tattoo of the Lord's prayer. I realised that this family did not have a churchy faith – but that certainly did not mean that their faith was not real. What did baptism mean to them? Probably not a coherent, theologically nuanced set of beliefs – but it was clearly important in some way that may teach me a thing or two about this faith I claim to represent. Would I honestly be willing to endure that much pain and make such a permanent statement in a prayer to God??

There is something about baptism which means it always takes place on the boundaries of the church – it is a sacrament of boundary drawing. Baptism is one of the two dominical sacraments – actions which Jesus himself commanded us to do in the gospels. At the end of Matthew's gospel, the risen Jesus said to his disciples: "go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you". They had seen baptism done by John the Baptist, but it now took on a new significance; by baptism people not only repented and were offered forgiveness, they became part of this new Jesus Movement. In the early Church, baptism came to mark the boundary of inclusion. By baptising new members, the Church grew, its boundaries were moved outwards to include new people, increasingly different from the first disciples –at the time of Pentecost the believers were all Jewish, then Jewish converts were also included, then Pagans began to convert. Eventually it even reached those strange, barbaric, cold and wet shores of Britain, and the customs, language and ideas of our forebears began to be incorporated into this new Christian faith. The beautiful stone carvings of the Celtic people were given new life as they were used to make stone crosses. Churches and shrines to Saints were built on the old holy sites of the remote islands and hillsides.

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With each baptism the boundary of the Church is enlarged, and more and more of the wonderful colourful array of humanity becomes part of the family of faith. But how much of our faith can really come from these other influences, before the original message of Jesus is lost? Should we embrace new ideas and change, or should we uphold the bedrock of the Bible's teachings and oppose these different ideas which others bring to our faith? I think that we can do both – that we need to keep hold of the essentials of the faith, the message of Jesus found in the Bible, but also to be open to new ideas and perspectives. Sometimes they may even remind us theologians of a truth of our faith which we have lost sight of in all our debates and deep thinking!

Jesus is the key to hold on to through this process of change and evolution. Jesus' approach to those who were well schooled in theology was far harsher, he demanded and expected much more of them, than he did of the poor, the outcast, the sick, even tax collectors and Roman soldiers. These people were probably not as 'good' at practicing their religion as the Pharisees; they would not have known the scriptures as well, or prayed as regularly (after all, life was harsh and they needed to work all hours to feed their families). And yet, Jesus treated these people as children of God, as capable of knowing God without becoming religious experts.

The gospel reading we heard earlier, where Jesus blessed the little children, is often read at baptism services. Of course, it is not really about baptism at all, but it does show how quick Jesus was to welcome and offer God's blessing to little children, as he was to those who were child-like - to those innocents who perhaps knew very little theology, who may have been considered very deficient in religious observance for the time, but who sought out God and his blessing. This rather reminds me of the family in the story I told earlier – An uncomplicated faith, perhaps a little inarticulate and not very churchy, would, I feel sure, not be rejected by Jesus.

And the first reading, coming from the Old Testament, and so of course predating baptism altogether, tells of another washing in the Jordan: Naaman, the captain in the Syrian army, who was presumably a pagan and perhaps worshipped many gods. Yet, Elisha offered him, not only the blessing of healing from leprosy from the God of Israel, but also knowledge of the One True God. God is not confined to the boundaries of the Church, he is not just the property of religious people, He is present and active in all the world, and can meet with people of all kinds.

Baptism is a sacrament at the boundaries of the Church – but the question is, what kind of boundary do we want to draw? Will it be a twelve foot high concrete wall, with razor wire on the top and a sign saying 'keep out' – or will it be a little picket fence, where Christians can look out on the world and learn from it, where we can have conversations with our neighbours of all faiths and none. Will it be a boundary which we are willing to move to incorporate new ideas, new cultures, new people? My reading of scripture tells me that this latter is more akin to how God treats outsiders, those on the margins, those who are perhaps not religious experts, but seek God's blessings for their families. Ours is a living, evolving faith, and the Church must keep the right balance between holding on to the truths revealed to us, and being open to new ideas: We must interpret the message afresh for this generation, and that will mean being willing to listen and learn and change.