



Eucharist celebrated. No one harmed.

You know, of course, that the church's year is meant to give structure and to teach us – or at least remind us - of the shape of the Christian faith. Christmas and Epiphany, including today's observance of the Baptism of Christ, have the job of revealing both the birth and the significance of Jesus.

We have the arrival laid out in the Christmas stories of his birth. We are then given the story of the important seekers who come to honour the child (the Gospel of Matthew provides that story and refers to 'wise men', not kings, and does not specify the number, contrary to the misleading claims of The Revd John Hopkins' 1857 carol *We Three Kings of Orient Are*).

Today, The Baptism of Christ (which we heard read from Luke's account) serves a complementary purpose, that of showing God's approval of Jesus: first in the claim that "the Holy Spirit descended upon him in bodily form like a dove" and then that "a voice came from heaven [which said], 'You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.'

Luke makes sure to give the message that Jesus' subsequent work and teaching is derived from the Holy Spirit and that Jesus himself is God's Son. And the story ensured that baptism became the almost-non-negotiable rite of admission into the church (though some sects such as the Quakers and the Salvation Army do not practice it).

For the majority of Christian Churches, baptism is viewed as a sacrament: that is *it effects change*; it is an outward and visible sign of an inward and invisible happening. Most denominations regard baptism and the Eucharist as sacraments, and some have added to those such things as confession, anointing, confirmation, marriage and Holy Orders.

Since I was nurtured in faith by the Quakers, you won't be surprised to learn that I suspect much of this may be down to what could be called *sacramental inflation*. And as with all inflation, the danger is that value is eroded. So, like many Christians, I stick with what are called the 'dominical sacraments', meaning those associated with Christ (- commanded by Christ-) as recorded in the gospels: baptism and Eucharist.

But I don't want to give the impression that I have shed all my non-conformist tendencies. In fact, what I actually believe is that there are sacraments without number. Or, more precisely, sacramental possibilities without number. Perhaps we could consider that further as a way of taking today's subject seriously and without, as it were, looking only backwards. I've suggested before that the church's liturgical year can end up rather like driving a car whilst looking only through the rear-view mirror. Its not a safe way to move through life. These foundational stories are important – who could say otherwise – but not as important as the truths they claim to witness to and how those are experienced in our lives.

Essential to the Christian claim is that God *still is*, and is not confined to *only then*; that God's call is made today, to us, not only *then* and not only to *them*; that whilst the birth, work, teaching, death and resurrection of Christ is historic and has achieved something persistent and permanent, yet it falls to each person to welcome it into their own lives, *now*. To assent and consent to what has been done and what is offered. And because we are muddled, often conflicted, sometimes contrary, often bruised, riding conflicting impulses – in short *because we're human* – we have to assent and consent again and again; start over again and again; clear

out our human junk again and again, and open the windows of our souls, again and again.

Baptism is associated with water: the water of the River Jordan and of the Font. Water cleanses. It represents regeneration. Yet too much of it can kill. The symbolism of baptism is indeed that we die to an old self in order to make possible the birth of a new self. Paul, in the Letter to the Romans says *we were therefore buried with him through baptism into death in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead (by the power of God), so we too may lead a new life*. This is important to consider. The sacramental work of baptism is achieved not just by addition but also by depletion. We are to relinquish in order to receive.

The work of baptism is not only something to be repeated throughout our lives but is also to be found well beyond any Font. I hope you have found it so. And along with it, sacramental gifts: those outward and visible happenings that bring you inward, invisible change. Think of those times when you experienced joy or loss or new insight. The kind of joy or loss or insight that eclipses everything else and yields up some new, somehow more real, experience.

Think of moments of connection: with your own deepest self and with others. Or aroused by art or the physical world. Think of moments when you have been brought low and have no choice but to face your own failure and poverty.

We may carelessly use the cliché 'a baptism of fire' and yet be blind to the important baptismal moments that visit our lives; moments when something within dies, to be recast and reborn. Sometimes these moments are accompanied by tears, sometimes laughter.

There's no pinning them down. Sometimes our body itself provides the waters of baptism: St Ephrem the Syrian spoke of our eyes as two baptismal fonts and of tears being the body's own baptismal waters that cleanse, heal, and renew life. We might know what he meant.

What I am exploring is whether the best way of marking our remembrance of the Baptism of Christ is to use baptism as one way of understanding our lived lives, particularly those moments when through loss or love, threat and

possibility, sudden insight, clarity, compassion, healing or shocking illumination we sense an important change within and something tangible without. I'm not meaning that in a trite way. And I realise the risks of even trying to describe it. I hope it might mean something, or at least be an interesting possibility to consider.

What all this focuses on is a question for anyone who wants to take the claims of Christ and of the church seriously: where does it gain real traction in our lives? Does our baptism, does participating in the Eucharist, have meaning beyond themselves?

The other day, when I was thinking about this, an imagined headline came into my mind. It appeared so clearly I laughed out loud. I saw in my mind's eye a headline which read: *Priest celebrates Eucharist. No one harmed*. Well, I wouldn't want anyone harmed, so rewrote it: *Priest celebrates Eucharist. No one changed*.

You might see what I mean. Life is short. It carries responsibility to ourselves and others and beyond. The claims and promises of the Gospel are significant. They claim to lead us into truth. The meaning of baptism, and our participation in the Eucharist are not on a par with worldly success or a posting on Facebook. They are superior to those things, and point to the drama and sacramental possibilities of living adventurously.

I have a hunch that in being open to those sacramental moments we are more likely to sense that, whatever mess we are in, we are in fact God's beloved child by adoption, in whom God is indeed well pleased. I wish such moments for you, and for me.

Hugh Valentine