

The Baptism of Christ

It is quite a dilemma when families come asking for baptism for their children, especially when they don't come to church. I give them the booklets about baptism, I try to get them to understand the seriousness and the strong language that they and their chosen Godparents will be agreeing to, however many times I am left feeling that it is being done as the thing to do and an excuse for a party, so I hand the family and the child over to God knowing that he can achieve things I can't and hoping that if nothing else a seed will be sown that some when else will start to grow. I never refuse a request.

Matthew's Gospel is the only one where John seems to be unwilling to baptise Jesus. John knows that Jesus doesn't need to repent and be made clean but he complies. When Jesus comes out of the water this is the turning point, Jesus early years are now over and he submits himself to the Father's calling.

He knows it is the will of the Father that he is baptised, and this baptism is a symbol of his identification with all of us, he chooses to be like us. We live in a world that we have made into one which it is all too easy to sin, we need to repent and be cleansed from our sins and so Jesus, fully human and fully God, joins us.

He identifies with us rather than being superior to us, and shows that this is not a superficial washing away of a little dirt but it is about sin, which leads to our death. As Jesus steps into the water, he accepts the Father's will and the

cross that will go with it. The Holy Spirit comes upon him, telling of the Father's approval.

Christian baptism, recognises that all things that separate us from God need to die. Because Jesus receives our baptism and death we can receive his resurrection and life.

John was a heaven sent prophet by whom the Messiah was to be revealed. Israel's God has brought his people's long story to a strange point, Jesus, Israel's representative, who is also God's own son, is to bring God to all the nations as that other prophet Isaiah tells us. The whole human race are his chosen people, they can all be inheritors of his promises to Israel.

Peter has doubts about God giving the Spirit to the Gentiles (Acts 9), and the early church also struggled with it, but throughout the Gospels and in Acts we have stories of others recognising Jesus rather than his own. Here we have the story of Cornelius, at whose house Peter arrives to witness to the Risen Lord, Peter, obediently, tells the story. Following our reading we hear of the Holy Spirit coming upon Cornelius and his household and of their subsequent baptism with water.

When Peter returns to the circumcised believers in Jerusalem he was criticised but he explained what had happened and said "So if God gave them the same gift as he gave us who believed in Jesus Christ, who was I to think that I could oppose God?" (Acts 11:17)

Cornelius and Peter were very different people. Cornelius was a wealthy Gentile and a military man. Peter was a

Jewish fisherman turned preacher, but in Cornelius' house that day a new chapter in Christian history was written as a Jewish Christian leader and a Gentile Christian convert each discovered something significant about God at work in another person. As we move towards the week of Christian Unity this perhaps is a thought that ought to go with us, we need to try to understand how God is working in other people. If we disagree with other believers, before we judge them, perhaps we should listen to them and attempt to see how the Holy Spirit may have something to teach us through them.

Last week I said we were a strange group of people who might have had nothing in common except for our faith in Christ. Much like the early Church we will have our differences as well as our commonalities and differences with other Christians, but we are called on to love one another and then we may be able to learn from each other.

Jesus' baptism reminds us that we are all sinners who need to repent and to be cleansed from our sins and that he died on the cross for us, so that we may be saved. God has a plan for all the nations of the world, that justice, righteousness and peace may reign, and that we, who have been called by him, are to be a light to all. We can only achieve that by allowing the Holy Spirit to work in our lives so that God's plans may be fulfilled.