

**Baptism matters**

*Isaiah 43:1-7; Luke 3:15-17, 21-22*

It stands in front of us all each Sunday – the font. Occasionally there is a baptism, one of the most wonderful services in the life of the Church. A time of joy; a time of welcome; a time of inclusion; a time of new beginning and promise. I am reminded of the words of Timothy Radcliffe, a former Master of the Dominican Order: “Christianity will flourish in the twenty-first century if we grasp that the Church is above all the community of the baptised.”<sup>i</sup>

About a third of the world’s population are baptised, some 2.3 billion people. People are baptised for all sorts of reasons, perhaps because of a profound experience of conversion, or to pass on their faith to their children, but also just because it is expected, to please the grandparents, to get their children into a Christian school, or just as an excuse for a party or a new hat.<sup>ii</sup>

Yet as Christians we make the grandest claims for baptism. When Pope John Paul II was asked what was the most important day in his life, he replied, “The day I was baptised.”

Baptism should be a powerful and memorable experience for participants and observers. For infants, their parents are enjoined to tell the child of its baptism. There is a tangible sense of love and blessing when the water is poured into the font, and the sign of the cross is made. It is not magic. But it opens the door to something bigger, wider, deeper, than just the water itself. Out of the water, the promise of new beginning and blessing comes.

Last January I had opportunity to visit both sides of the Jordan River. On the Israeli-Palestinian side they landmines from the 1967 war were still embedded in the ground; you could see them. The abandoned churches were left with doors and windows open, and through one of the windows in one of the churches you could see the font, and also the pages of a hymnbook or

Bible blowing in the wind. Work began last year to clear the mines so that the hundreds of thousands of tourists who want to visit the Baptismal site of Jesus can do so safely.

On the Jordanian side, the King of Jordan, and his family, all Muslims, have already cleared the site of mines. It is one of the most spiritual places I have visited. The site of the baptism of Jesus had been known to be around the Jordan River, but no one knew exactly where. An abandoned site in Jordan overlooking the river, was heavily mined in 1967 due to an acquired front line position during the Six-Day War. In 1994 after the signing of the Israel–Jordan peace treaty, the Jordanians led by the King's cousin Prince Ghazi, searched the area after a monk convinced him to take a look around what was thought to be the baptism site. When they found evidence of ruins, that was enough to encourage de-mining and further development. Soon afterwards, there were several archaeological digs, tourists influx and pilgrimage activity, and several papal and state visits. In July 2015, the site was designated as a UNESCO world heritage site and is now known as the most likely location for the baptism of Jesus by John the Baptist. The natural landscape and ancient ruins add a deep authenticity to this area of spiritual significance and it was good to take some moments to be still .... and to pray.

Baptism is a sign of new life and new beginning; it is a sign of hope and welcome. It was intensely moving to be here and to reflect on the promises of baptism, and how through them we are not only brought into nearness with the Lord, but also named and claimed.

At whatever age we are baptised, whatever we have done and been is irrelevant. None of our achievements matters. We may be a famous professor of medicine or a new-born baby, or a dying man who was adopted and not sure whether he was baptised or not as a child; at the font we are all at the beginning of a new life in Christ.

That life can be extraordinary, that life can be mundane. It will like as not contain both. Baptism is, or should be, the point when we are accepted into the family of faith, and stay there and grow there, and nurtured there, and protected there. When we are baptised we are called to be part of a sustaining community.

In an episode of *The Living Planet*, David Attenborough shows a vast mass of black and white Emperor penguins, clinging together in a great, gelatinous clump. Each penguin had been hatched on the feet of its own father but in that bitterly cold and hostile environment, it could only survive in the midst of the community. There was a continual flow of warm penguins taking their turn at the frozen circumference of the huddle, and of frozen penguins plodding to the centre to warm up again.

In the corrosive, chilly climate of the modern secular West, it is as hard for a solitary individual to retain their faith and live their faith graciously as it is for an isolated penguin to survive in the Antarctic winter. Through baptism, through coming out of the water, we have begun to belong. But we need the faithful community around us to help us grow in faith. We need to be together. Growing in faith applies not only to the Christian community but to every faith community. Growing in faith means learning to live by the light and the love that lived-out faith offers. When we come out of the waters of baptism our names are recorded. It is more than a record of our membership of the Church, as when you join a club or receive citizenship of a country. It is a sign that our names are treasured by God. The writer Herbert McCabe wrote, “We are not just human beings but human becomings...For us to be is to have a lifetime, a development...our lifetime is our life story.”<sup>iii</sup>

Which is why baptism matters. It is a step along the road of faith. Sometimes taken by others on our behalf; sometimes taken by us ourselves. Baptism is when we begin to belong to the family of Jesus. Here we receive names by which we will be called all our days. “When the Nazis came to power in Germany and Austria, they stamped the identity cards of Jews with new first names. All the men were called ‘Israel’ and the women, ‘Sara’. These names both identified people as Jews, but also wiped out their individuality...it was a parody of true naming, an unmaking of God’s creation.”<sup>iv</sup>

When we are baptized our names are recorded. It is a sign that our names are treasured by God. We are named in love, because God delights in us as we are welcomed, through baptism, in the family of God, claimed for Christ. In the waters of baptism, we are welcomed into a new

world, and nothing will ever be the same again for us. Which is why baptism matters. Not to be entered into lightly, or performed as a social nicety, or reduced to some superstitious ritual. It is the point when God, in Christ, says out loud, 'This one is mine, and this one, and this one.' Be baptized, then come into the fuller understanding of the Christian family by making profession of your faith, and find that you belong, to the Church, to the traditions and innovations, to the music and charity work, to the teaching and hospitality, and to Jesus. Baptism matters, because it is the sign that, whatever else happens in life, you belong to Jesus.

If you haven't yet, then maybe now, it is time.

**In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit**

**Amen**

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<sup>i</sup> Timothy Radcliffe, *Take the Plunge*, p1

<sup>ii</sup> *ibid*

<sup>iii</sup> Herbert McCabe, *God Still Matters*, p189

<sup>iv</sup> Radcliffe, p20