

January 8 & 9, 2012 – Church of the Epiphany

- The Rev. Dr. Tim Perry

On the Baptism of Jesus

How many of you can remember when you were baptized?

That's not surprising, is it? Most of us who are baptized were likely baptized as infants or young children. It's the way we do things.

But let me tell you a secret. I can remember when I was baptized. Let me tell you another one—so can Rachel. She was 15 and I—if you can believe it—was 27. I'll let Rachel tell her own story. Mine is long and a little complicated. Too complicated for a sermon. But I do want you to know that while I was raised in a Christian home and was raised a Christian, I was not baptized until I was almost 30.

Why do those stories matter?

They matter because they're an important reminder that what we call "believers' baptism" is—even for Anglicans—the normal way of being baptized.

Normal in two ways. It is, first of all, normal historically. The first followers of Jesus were baptized as adults. Our New Testament lesson gives us a good example. Here, we see Paul baptizing new believers in the name of Jesus because they had come to believe in Jesus.

The word had come, the people had responded in faith, and were baptized with water. (Let's leave aside the fact that they were baptized twice—that's a story for another sermon). For now, simply notice the pattern: preaching; response; baptism. That's the way—always the way—that it happens in the book of Acts. It is normal.

Second it's also normal theologically. The Church, Jesus tells us at the conclusion of Matthew's Gospel will grow as his disciples go into the world and make disciples by teaching and baptizing converts. In other words, the Christian Church's normal way of growing is by conversion not by believers having kids.

Preaching; response; Baptism. That is the normal way of things. It is how the church started. It is how the church is supposed to continue.

I know what some of you are thinking: "We've hired a closet Baptist!"

You haven't, actually. Aren't you relieved?

All three of my children were baptized as infants. The only baptisms I have celebrated have been of infants. The one baptism I celebrated here was of William Sarvas—a fabulous little lad, son of Colleen and Curtis, whom most of you know.

No, I believe in infant baptism. So strongly, in fact, that while in Winnipeg, I was once accused of wanting not a font but a hydrant at the West end of my parish so that I could send the grace of God indiscriminately throughout the neighbourhood.

The accusation, by the way, was valid. The contractors are coming to the Epiphany next week to look at the pipes.

But even I have to admit that when it comes to the Bible, the baptism of infants—while biblical and therefore permissible—is not the usual way.

Christian believers who were themselves baptized as believers began having children and it was not long before the church realized that these children were in some way related to the church—and that way required that they be baptized.

So, the Anglican Church (like Roman Catholics, Orthodox, and most Protestant denominations) recognizes that there are two ways to be baptized—the normal way, as believers and the not-quite-as-normal way, as the children of believers.

Now, let me tell you another secret. All of what I have just said is true. At the same time, it is also true that every baptism is an infant baptism. Every baptism—whether it follows a confession of faith or follows promises made by parents and godparents—every single one is an infant baptism.

What on earth does that mean?

To begin to sketch an answer, we need to move from the book of Acts to our Gospel lesson.

“In those days,” we read, “Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan.”

Have you ever wondered why?

The baptism of John was a baptism of repentance. Why would Jesus—the embodiment of the glory, righteousness, and truth of the heavenly Father—Why would Jesus submit to a baptism of repentance?

It certainly was not a matter of need. Jesus himself gives us a clue in St. Matthew’s version of the story. There he says, “it is proper for us in this way to fulfill all righteousness.”

Jesus does not need to be baptized. He freely undergoes baptism. He does so to fulfill all righteousness.

What does that curious phrase “fulfill all righteousness” mean? It means first of all, that in submitting to baptism, Jesus fully and completely identifies with us.

We talked about this last week. Do you remember?

God comes to us fully and freely as fully and freely human. He was—we read last week—named and circumcised on the eighth day. He came—we read last week—born of a woman, born under the law.

He came as one of us.

He stands with us.

Not aloof. Not over against. Not other. Not from a distance. Right here. Living, breathing, eating, sleeping. Right here walking into chilly Jordan.

He does not merely appear to be human. He is fully human. He is the Son of Mary. As one of us, he is baptized by John. As one of us, he will teach. As one of us, he will suffer. As one of us, he will die and be buried.

But it is not simply a matter of identifying with us. It is so much more.

Jesus was baptized not simply with us. He was baptized for us.

When he stepped into chilly Jordan's water, he stepped in to fulfill all righteousness. When he did that, he did the one thing we could not do. On our own we cannot fulfill all righteousness. On our own, we are—to use the New Testament's language—enslaved to sin. On our own, were we to go under the waters of baptism, to go under the watery chaos from which God called forth his creation at the beginning, we would never come up. We would be utterly and completely undone.

And that's why every baptism is an infant baptism.

Every baptism is an infant baptism because all of us come to the font completely and utterly helpless. Whether we are 8 days old or 8 years old or 18 or 80 or somewhere in between or before or after, when we come to the font, we come completely helpless.

We come to the font completely unable to fulfill all righteousness.

We come to the font completely incapable of restoring our relationship with God.

We come to the font completely incapable of setting ourselves free from sin, death and the devil.

We come to the font completely incapable of cleansing ourselves.

We come—whether we are coming for our children or as newly confessed Christians—knowing that the waters symbolise that which is our final end. Knowing that we will die. Knowing that, if God does not intervene, we and the little ones we carry will be overwhelmed.

If God does not intervene.

The Gospel for this morning is, simply, God has intervened.

And that is the good news of the Gospel for infants—for all of us who are helpless.

The Gospel is that Jesus, who does not need to fulfill all righteousness, freely fulfills all righteousness. He freely stands with us, and is baptized for us.

He does not merely go down in to the water, he does not merely descend to the grave. He comes up again out of the water. He comes up again from the dead. He turns the chaotic waters that hover at the edges of God's creation into the bath of regeneration. Into the very water of life.

The Gospel is that through baptism we are united to him and if we are united to him, sin death and the devil have no hold on us any longer.

Now, it's time to make things practical. It might be that it's time for some of you to be baptized. It might be that it's time for others of your to bring your children to be baptized. It might also be time for still others of you either to renew or to confirm and own your baptismal vows.

Remember how I was accused of wanting a hydrant instead of a font? Well, I don't really. But what I do want is a crowd at that old stone font at the Easter Vigil and, if we need to, on Easter Sunday. Do you want to be a part of that crowd? If you do, I can't wait to see you there. Speak with me after service and I'll tell you how we can make the arrangements.

We'll make those arrangements because, "In those days, Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the river Jordan."