

Easter 6 John 14:15-21

Baptism is not the washing away of bodily impurities but the appeal made to God from a good conscience. Those were the words we just heard from the letter St. Peter wrote to the early Christian churches scattered around Asia and what we now call the Middle East, Turkey and the like. Baptism is not the washing away of bodily impurities but the appeal made to God from a good conscience.

Baptism may be one of the things we get confused about as Christians and it's worse for non-Christians, if we get confused, how can we share with those who are not a part of our faith? The bit we can all agree on is that baptism is central to the Christian faith, it is an initiation rite, we become baptised in order to become Christian. It's a bit like the thing we do to show we are a member of the organisation, if this were a social club we might pay a fee and sign up to a set of rules in order to be a member, but in the church we are baptised and we charge no fee, have no real process for exclusion, there is an understanding that this is the beginning of a journey for the person to be baptised but the progress of that journey is unknown, some will grow up within the family of faith week by week, year by year, understanding more and more through the support of the rest of the family, that is the church congregation, what it is to be a Christian. Others will have little contact with church and will learn their religion from their family at home, their parents and god parents and from their own reading as they get older and that may bring them into a community of faith later on. Still others will be baptised and will never give another thought to church, faith or God the rest of their days.

We know this to be true from our encounters with people and we are often tempted to try to establish an understanding of why the person to be baptised is being presented in order to avoid the last scenario, we are concerned as a church that baptism should be an informed encounter and we want to only offer it to people ready to be fully involved with church life. Some churches have all sorts of rules and regulations, you must attend regularly for a set amount of time, sometimes up to a year. Still others only baptise adults after they have come to a decision of their own and after much study. Many Anglicans are a bit more at ease with it all, we have a strong belief that God calls us all, he calls us into baptism, even teeny tiny children who have no idea what's going on. We believe he calls them into relationship with him by prompting a parent or grandparent to seek baptism on their behalf, otherwise no one would do it or everyone would. It has always been the case that baptism is an encounter with God, and those encounters cannot be one sided, without the Lord on board, neither should they be impeded by people putting conditions on who can have the encounter.

A fairly standard policy is to invite families who wish to have their children baptised to come along to church to meet with us and ensure they are comfortable making the commitments that they will to bring their child up in the Christians faith, that is a requirement of baptism and no one wants to encourage anyone to make a promise they were unwilling or unable to keep before God and to their own child, particularly if they were not well informed of what they were signing up to. But how that upbringing in faith is undertaken, we cannot predict, we hope and pray these new Christians will choose to share their journey with us as we love walking the way with them, but it's not our choice and we are not here to keep tabs on how well they are living their lives.

Baptism is not the washing away of bodily impurities but the appeal made to God from a good conscience. There is no sense that each time a baby is washed with the baptismal waters somehow it makes them clean in a way that can be lost by separation from the church, rather the Priest is appealing to God on behalf of the child that here is someone, who by their good conscience has recognised their need for God in their life and wishes to enter into Christ's salvation by the resurrection. That offering of Christ on the cross was for us all while we were still sinners and the salvation is offered by the resurrection through grace to all who receive him now.

We heard in this morning's gospel of Jesus' promise of a councillor, an advocate, the spirit of truth, to be sent to the Church at Pentecost and we will remember that event 2 weeks from now. That spirit works within us, we believe, the spirit is a guide for us, something indescribable of God that prompts and pushes us places we would otherwise not choose to go, it prompts and pushes parents to consider baptism for their children because God has a purpose for those children, should they choose to engage with it or not.

Baptism is an opportunity for us to accept the grace of God, to acknowledge that he is there and he offers us a new way of living, different from the rest of the world, a way of living in peace and hope because we are already in receipt of salvation. As Jesus told those first disciples, whoever loves me will be loved by my father and I will love them and disclose myself to them. The choice to respond to God's love through baptism opens for us a conversation that can lead to understanding and faith. It does not magically protect a person from things that go on in the world that we would rather didn't happen, it will not change their character, it does not clean our perceived sinful nature as human beings. We go into the water and symbolically we are reborn in the spirit, but to see the results we need to recognise that we have appealed to God and for him to respond we have to let him in.

We can pray for all the baptised that God's purpose for them will make itself known, however long it takes and whatever that purpose is. When a child is involved we can pray that whatever moved their parents to baptise them continues to move them to maintain that upbringing in the faith. And where a family may not be confident in doing so alone, that they will be gracious to us and allow our Christian church family to play the part that they commit to in the baptism rite, to support and nurture that new Christian on their journey in whatever way we can.

We may not regularly have the privilege of welcoming a new member into God's church, but when we do, let us appeal to God from their good conscience let us remember we are here not to wash them clean, those who seek God are already perfect, just as God intended, but rather we are here to witness their salvation and the start of their conversation with their heavenly father that we pray will continue throughout their lives.