



The Seven Sacraments

Baptism

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Isaiah 55: 6–13 Matthew 28: 16–20

For as the rain cometh down, and the snow from heaven, and returneth not thither, but watereth the earth, and maketh it bring forth and bud, that it may give seed to the sower, and bread to the eater:

So shall my word be that goeth forth out of my mouth: it shall not return unto me void, but it shall accomplish that which I please, and it shall prosper in the thing whereto I sent it. Isaiah 55: 10–11 KJV

Clearly not a reading about baptism; perhaps not a natural pick as a reading for a baptism service. But this is the text that plays in my mind whenever I conduct a baptism.

Among the many insights of the prophet behind this part of the book of Isaiah is the understanding that while God's action is announced and interpreted through human agents, God's action is not dependant on human agency. In fact, as this prophet repeatedly and gloriously proclaims, God acts before a word is spoken, whether or not anyone is looking, even if it seems as though nothing is happening. There is a purpose and intention in God's word and action – which will be accomplished.

It is different according to denomination, but as a priest in the Church of England, I rarely know where or how the words and actions of baptism service land. But they are never empty. As with all sacraments, as with all worship, there is a purpose in the words and actions of baptism which, we may trust, will be accomplished. Human agency, our words and actions, announce and interpret the action of God in baptism; and encourage, enable and support the response to God of the baptised person – and those around them.

If the Old Testament reading offers reflection on the pre-emptive action of God. The New Testament reading is my preferred choice of reading for a baptism service. There are plenty to choose from of course: the accounts of Jesus' own baptism – for his example, for inspiration, and to reflect on the identity and role of the baptised; from Mark or Luke Jesus' blessing of the children – for reflection on welcome and belonging; the teaching of John the Baptist – for reflection on repentance and forgiveness and new life in the waters of baptism; John's account of Nicodemus' night-time conversation with Jesus about what it means to be born 'from above,' of water and the spirit. Or this: the last words of Jesus from Matthew's Gospel. Jesus gathers his tiny community, and even while some still have their doubts, he gives them a task and makes them a promise.

The task is to pass on his teaching, and to baptise – in every place and generation. The promise is what will enable them, despite their doubts and frailties, to fulfil their task; it will enable disciples in every generation to continue to fulfil it, despite their doubts and frailties; it is the promise of Christ's presence with them – in every place and generation. The promise that God already acts for, in and through them.

As with the Eucharist, Baptism is something Jesus did, and something he asked us to do. As with the Eucharist how we follow his example and obey that command is the subject of seemingly endless discussion, variation, controversy, conflict even.

In my last job I worked with those newly licensed and ordained for public ministry. Alongside the things they had to cover there was space in the curates' programme for things they felt they needed or wanted to explore further. Without fail every group at some point asked for input, discussion (the opportunity for a good argument) about baptism. Of all the things these new deacons and priests were doing for the first time baptism – of infants and children in particular – often caused the most heart-searching, set the greatest challenge, raised the most questions.

The presenting issue was usually whether it is fair or appropriate to ask people, who are often not regular worshippers, to navigate, with integrity, the concepts and the promises of baptism. And baptism brings us up against some huge concepts and correspondingly demanding promises – it is after all the sacrament in which we tackle the devil head on (new optional liturgy notwithstanding). But more than that: baptism, like the sacrament of marriage, responds to the very human need to mark a stage of life, to sanctify and bless a stage in life. Which means that, as with marriage, and sometimes confirmation, in baptism we find ourselves bringing together a rite of passage and a sacrament. Which can be a bit of a balancing act.

And it raises more questions.

There is the question of the extent to which baptism is a covenant agreement. In baptism we lay claim to the promises of God and make promises to God. There is mutual, shared responsibility but it is not equal – the initiative is God's, we make our promises using the formula 'with the help of God, I will.' And it is not a bargain – in offering baptism we have to do our fair share of myth busting. We proclaim forgiveness and reject all evil on behalf of a child at their baptism. Like any of us they will have to work at that continually life-long. And we are certainly not freeing up their parents from childhood naughtiness or teenage strops.

There is the question of preparation and instruction. How much should a candidate or, in the case of children, parents and godparents, know before a baptism can take place? And of what they know, how far should they be seen to be committed? In the Baptist Church significant instruction and personal commitment must come before baptism is offered. In the Church of England, we may not delay a baptism other than for necessary preparation. Instruction, and often personal commitment – particularly where the candidate is a child follows. Which puts the onus on the whole community of the Church, rather than focussing on the candidate for baptism and their immediate family.

The first promise in the Common Worship Baptism service is made by the whole congregation and is the promise to encourage and support in their faith – after the baptism has taken place. Which means that while preparation is important the real question is not how ready parents and godparents are to deal with the big questions of the church,

but how ready the local church community is to help them, and their child, explore those questions and come to their own understanding of them in due course.

The need is clearest where the candidate is a child but, of course, even after a long period of instruction and a clear experience of conversion the role of the whole community is vital for anyone striving to grow in faith and keep their baptismal promises. The issue underlying the question of instruction is about welcome, and the relationship between belonging and believing.

There is the question about the operation of God's grace, and the relationship between grace and sacrament. Does the sacrament – any sacrament – announce or confirm the action of God's grace. Does baptism announce or confirm the forgiveness of sins, the new birth in the spirit, membership of the household of God? Our liturgies allow for both. The action of God is proclaimed and confirmed, the grace of God is already at work in the candidate; and it is announced – baptism marks a new stage in life and faith.

The decision to ask for the sacrament of baptism is itself significant, it demonstrates our readiness to accept the grace which is offered, and live and work with and for God. But does God really wait for us to get around to booking a baptism service to work his redemption within us?

As with any sacrament reflection on baptism really only comes together in the celebration of a baptism. The symbols and actions draw us in spiritually and emotionally as well as intellectually. Sacraments – worship – are about transformation through encounter with the divine. What I really wanted to do this evening was celebrate a baptism! There are other opportunities for that! But I do want to finish with a note on a baptism.

Last Sunday we baptised a 6 year old, who has been on and off part of the congregation at St Mary's since she was born – regularly in the last half year. The decision to ask for baptism was hers. During the service she made her own promises, joining in with her supporting adults. Where and how the words and actions of the service landed for this child and her family – and, come to that, the wider church community – I can't say for certain. But I do know that something touched her in that service. I know that because this morning she gave me a card that says I am the best vicar in the world.

More seriously, I know that because of the way she engaged with the service. One example: after the formal welcome, and the friendly round of applause from the congregation she stayed with me to introduce the Peace. I invited her to stretch out her arms with me to offer the Peace to the congregation – she stood up on her toes and reached as wide as she could, an embrace she was too shy to give each person individually. I know that the service touched her because wherever, and however, the words and actions of that service landed they are purposeful signs and symbols of God's grace and action:

*¹⁰For as the rain and the snow come down from heaven,
and do not return there until they have watered the earth,
making it bring forth and sprout,
giving seed to the sower and bread to the eater,*

*¹¹so shall my word be that goes out from my mouth;
it shall not return to me empty,
but it shall accomplish that which I purpose,
and succeed in the thing for which I sent it.* Isaiah 55: 10–11 NRSV