

As a parish priest I daily face the challenge of scheduling, specifically, how much time do I spend in the office, how much time with parishioners, especially those in need, how much time should I devote to special projects and finally how much time to hang around constructively in the community. A colleague, who is addicted to twitter, often sits in a coffee shop and sends out the word “I am here ... come to me” or something similar. He says that often, folks show up! Clearly they are not Anglicans!

You meet all sorts of people when you simply hang around. I’m not that good at hanging around myself, but St. Paul perfected the art. So one day, while on his own he met some believers who knew of John the Baptist but not the Holy Spirit or Jesus himself through whom the Spirit is made known.

(Paul) said to them, ‘Did you receive the Holy Spirit when you became believers?’ They replied, ‘No, we have not even heard that there is a Holy Spirit.’ Then he said, ‘Into what then were you baptized?’ They answered, ‘Into John’s baptism.’ Paul said, ‘John baptized with the baptism of repentance, telling the people to believe in the one who was to come after him, that is, in Jesus.’ On hearing this, they were baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus. When Paul had laid his hands on them, the Holy Spirit came upon them.

Using these words as a foundation some Pentecostal Christians claim a two-fold process as normative for all baptism. “Believe in Jesus, then, afterward, be baptized in the Holy Spirit.” I don’t think this is the case nor do most Anglicans. In the book of Acts alone there are a number of contrary references. What I do note however is that baptism is a ritual encounter with God which leads to all sorts of other discoveries, challenges, delights, duties, insights and community. Baptism is the beginning of the journey towards which the Christian church exists to promote. Baptism promotes movement and spiritual growth, when engaged intentionally for while religion itself sometimes gets stuck, faith itself is not static.

So lets hang around some more, as John the baptizer is working the Jordan riverbank. Dozens of curious faith-seekers seek him out for his gift of baptizing. He preaches a baptism of repentance leading to the forgiveness of sins, something offered only until this time through the rituals of temple sacrifice. As he baptizes he is careful to say:

‘The one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to stoop down and untie the thong of his sandals. I have baptized you with water; but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.’

In the midst of his speech, unobtrusively, another figure enters the riparian fray. Mark identifies him as Jesus:

Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. And just as he was coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on him. And a voice came from heaven, ‘You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.’

In this the beginning of Mark’s Gospel, John is the messenger announcing that the message itself will shortly appear on the scene, in the person of Jesus. Now he shines the spotlight on Jesus who he will introduce us to in the following Gospel pages. Divinity appears in unlikely humanity. Wow!

Mark’s description of Jesus’ baptism comes from Jesus’ personal perspective, as he (Jesus) comes out of the water he sees the heavens torn apart, and the dove descending. His vocation is assured, confirmed or specially communicated. As for the by-standers, and for us, no special instructions are given at this time.

Elsewhere in scripture the church is commissioned to baptize in the name of Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Paul baptized others but prioritized preaching over and above baptism to the Corinthian church. Baptism and admission to communion seems to be an issue with the current Canadian house of Bishops, who urge that no communion be offered to un-baptized persons. To me this speaks against both tradition and contemporary social insight, so I continue offer an “open table” or “unfenced altar” until convinced or ordered otherwise. I appreciate the unrestricted appeal of a worship service from Scotland’s Iona Community which I have shared before and will do so once more this morning:

The table of bread and wine is now made ready.  
It is the table of company with Jesus  
And with all those who love him.  
It is the table of sharing with the poor of the world,  
With whom Jesus identified himself.  
It is the table of communion with the earth  
In which Christ became incarnate.  
So, come to this table,  
You who have much faith  
And you who would like to have more;  
You who have been to this sacrament often,  
And you who have not been for a long time;  
You who have tried to follow Jesus,  
And you who have failed.  
Come. It is Christ who invites us to meet him here.

So I prefer that baptism be an appeal to aid the faith journey and not an impediment. That said, let’s return to my point, if Baptism is the start of the journey, what of it’s end or it’s middle? Like diets and other personal improvement exercises, it’s easy to start, but another thing to conclude. Beyond our own personal foibles, lies the unpredictability of environment and human culture. I like Peter Millar’s words on the front of your bulletins:

Unknown it is,  
the road ahead,  
but could we breathe  
if all was understood

Life’s very breath is tied up with uncertainty. We call this mystery! We all face the unknown (or what Canadian Jesuit Bernard Lonnergan calls the “known unknown”) each and every day. Hope, in its many faces and expressions allows us to proceed despite the uncertainty of the unknown, and thankfully faith supplies the energy and necessary confidence. Of faith, today’s collect also speaks:

Keep your children  
born of water and the Spirit  
faithful to their calling

That’s the challenge isn’t it? Keep us faithful O God, we remain willing but need some help here. This past week the weather has been wet, wet and wet. No shortage of water recently. Likewise, the promise of scripture, voiced by Jesus, Paul and the communion of saints is that there is enough Spirit, enough divine presence, enough transcendent love to go around. Baptism relates us organically to God, through Christ in a wonderfully uplifting and heart-opening way. While just the beginning, baptism is a good place to begin. As Trevor reminded us last week, don’t get stuck however at the beginning of the story, but seek the fullness of the experience which lies ahead.

Thanks be to God