

## Baptism of Christ: The Power of Water and the Power of the Spirit

Recent flooding in the north of England, in south west Scotland and this week around Aberdeen has reminded us forcefully of the power of water. Excessive water has rushed down hillsides and risen to unprecedented levels in urban areas, causing mayhem and misery for large numbers of people. We probably all know someone who has been affected significantly. Happily, despite the devastation, I haven't heard any reports of loss of life. This, of course, is in contrast to the effects of flooding elsewhere in the world, where the sobering power of water often claims many lives as well as property, land and livelihoods – and with alarming ease and regularity. In 2004 Bangladesh saw its worst flooding in years, with 800 people dying. In the same year in the Philippines, 300 people died in flash floods east of Manila. These examples raise very serious questions about who is or is not acting responsibly in their oversight of environmental matters, in connection with such issues as deforestation or rising sea levels through greenhouse gas emissions. In our own context, once again, questions are being asked about what can be done to mitigate the effects of future flooding in the UK. This week's latest suggestion is that farmers should be paid to allow flood waters to be diverted from rivers onto farmland in order to reduce water levels in urban areas. The matter of planting more trees has also been raised. We have perhaps been too glib over time regarding the impact of centuries of deforestation in these islands. There are of course no easy answers. ...

We are learning again that water is very powerful. And this fact was etched indelibly onto the Hebrew memory. The most important actual and symbolic experience of the Hebrew people, the Exodus, involved both the parting of waters to allow their escape and the overwhelming resurgence of the waters to cause the drowning of horses, chariot drivers and soldiers of the Egyptian army. The Hebrews' salvation was achieved through the staying of the waters.... Thus, the words of Isaiah from our first reading carried a deep and powerful resonance, "when you pass through the waters I will be with you, and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you". To the exiles away from home, here was a message of penetrating/uplifting reassurance. "Do not fear, for I have redeemed you, I have called you by name, you are mine." Whether

they looked back or looked forward, whether they looked deep into their soul-history or outwards into present experience, they should know that the Lord was their rescuer – especially in the face of mighty waters.

With this as the background to the Christian story, it is little surprise that the baptism of Jesus in the waters of the river Jordan focuses and expresses a fundamental insight about *human regeneration through divine promise*. As the saviour rises out of the waters, the Spirit descends and the voice declares, “You are my Son, the Beloved, with you I am well pleased.” And what we register is that a new and renewing initiative of rescue is being enacted, and indeed inaugurated, and we all then wait expectantly for what will unfold!... God’s rescue of humanity is under way again – a revelation of grace and truth is being brought to birth – in the incarnate life!!!...

One paradox of the waters of baptism is that just as the waters threaten to drown and overwhelm the individual, and yet they do not, so they are also taken as a token of washing, cleansing and regeneration. The waters signify both threat and promise! This paradox is to some extent resolved by the fact that the threat of drowning is spiritualised, for it is understood as a ‘dying with Christ’, out of which comes a resurrection!... in which we share! The threat becomes a promise!... In 1 Peter Ch.3 the writer talks of “being saved through water”. In this case the connection is to the great flood in Genesis Ch.7 when those saved were the eight members of Noah’s family. And this is described in 1 Peter as a prefiguring of baptism. Water baptism as a figure of salvation is deeply compelling to us. At the same time, however, as we receive the deep reassurance of being delivered from the waters of death, we are right, I think, not to lose sight of the ever-present threat posed by water – for this points us at a spiritual level towards the woe and anguish associated with estrangement from God and from ourselves. The deep waters of death, of cynicism, despair and ennui, are all too ready to engulf us and rob us of our freedom and potential. At the same time as some of us are making fine, optimistic New Year resolutions and making plans, there is always the temptation to be facing 2016 thinking, “oh no, not another year”, so reflecting that sense of dissonance and dissatisfaction that haunts the human condition. And yet, as Christians baptised into Christ we cannot stay long in that forlorn place, because our baptism

reminds us that, graciously and wonderfully, and at the great cost of the love of God, we have been brought through the deep waters of death to become a new creation!... raised to life in triumph! For, as we pray together in the baptism service, “God has delivered us from the dominion of darkness and given us a place with the saints in light!”

And here it makes good sense to turn to our reading from Acts Ch.8. The apostle Philip has been proclaiming the good news in the city of Samaria and we are told in verse 8 that, “there was great joy in that city”. In our own verses of today, we hear that Samaria “had accepted the word of God”, evidently gladly. In terms of the specifics of their conversion, however, those who had been baptised had been baptised in the name of the Lord Jesus, *but had not yet received the Spirit*. The great significance of this little encounter is of course that *this had to be put right*. Thus Peter and John, the top brass, are sent to lay hands on the new converts/disciples so that they should duly receive the Spirit. And so this little piece of scriptural dynamite tells us: There is no true baptism without the gifting, power and presence of the Holy Spirit! And this profound truth echoes across the years with a resounding, glorious music! For every time we enact a baptism at the font, the Spirit is invoked in multiple ways and we affirm that “by the power of your Holy Spirit you give your faithful people new life in the water of baptism.” It is the life of the Spirit and the walk of faith undertaken in the power of the Spirit that raises us to be that new creation, as the lovely Iona hymn says, “unlocking the potential hidden from our eyes”.

It is, of course, also the testimony of the gospels that the Spirit is the life of the baptised. The centrality of the Spirit is unmistakable. (At the same time as we witness the Spirit descending on Jesus at his baptism, we also hear John declare that whilst he baptises with water, the one coming after him will baptise with the Holy Spirit and fire.) Yet we should beware of thinking that the Spirit is only a force for faith within individuals. If we bring together Genesis 1 (the Spirit hovering over the waters) and Romans 8 (the Spirit groaning amidst the creation) we can say, I think, that the Spirit that hovered over the face of the waters in creation, breathing life into matter, continues also to be at work in the yearning for the *liberation of the creation* that is alluded to by Paul in Romans 8. The created order, that was “subjected to futility” and yet waits “to be set free

from its bondage to decay”, waits to be set free by the Spirit !... Thus the Spirit is political as well as personal and communal!!...

... and I would want to suggest, therefore, that not only should we rejoice today in the joy of our baptism that overcomes the deep waters of death, banishes our estrangement from God and ourselves and launches us as a new creation; but that also we might want to be responsive to the fact that our baptism beckons us to let the Spirit renew us in responsible living within and towards this beautiful created world: especially as we seek to negotiate the challenges of environmental degradation, and of extreme weather conditions and their causes, both here and across the world.

Water, we recognise, is threatening. It is also one of nature’s most generous and bountiful tokens of life. The waters of baptism take very seriously the perils of the deep waters of death. They also defy death and rejoice in the eternal regeneration that is given in Christ – given as grace upon grace. This regenerative power of the Spirit in baptism is captured beautifully in one of Ted Hughes’s River Poems, written in the early 1980s, called, simply, ‘River’. In it, he describes how a river regenerates itself in its recycling of waters - that flow into it and out of it. And he hints at an almost mystical quality of healing and renewal:

“water will go on issuing from heaven, in dumbness uttering spirit brightness through its broken mouth. Scattered in a million pieces and buried its dry tombs will split, at a sign in the skies, at a rending of veils. It will return stainless for the delivery of this world.”

Through the Spirit, in water baptism, we and the world are wonderfully delivered. Amen.

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