

Baptism as the basis of Christian identity

Romans 6:1-10

For many of us, baptism is something that happened in the distant past, something that we barely remember, if indeed we were old enough to remember it at all. We have probably all been baptised at some stage, but it is not something that figures largely in our consciousness, as a vital part of our Christian life. It is for most people an event in the past, with little contemporary significance. But baptism is not simply a ritual we conduct in the church, to recognise the birth of a new child, or to recognise an adult who is joining the church. Baptism lies at the heart of our identity as Christians: it is an acknowledgement that we are no longer simply members of the human race, we are now members of the people of God.

In many countries, baptism is not simply the pleasant ceremony we are used to conducting. For some, it can be an almost certain death sentence. Muslims in particular recognise that baptism is the irrevocable step of commitment to Christ that indicates a former Muslim has abandoned their previous faith, and has definitively changed their allegiance. They no longer trust in Allah and Mohammed as the final prophet of Allah, as they call God, but instead have placed their faith in Christ as the Son of God, and the final messenger from God who alone can bring salvation. For a Muslim, this is of course blasphemy, for they do not consider that God can have a son, and to accept Christ as the Son of God and the final word from God of course discredits Mohammed. But Muslims accept Christ as a prophet of God, although superceded by Mohammed, and treat him with respect and honour, indeed more so than many who call themselves Christians, as can be seen from the Muslim outrage at the blasphemous exhibits at the Museum of New Zealand – Te Papa – which many so-called “liberal” Christians defended as legitimate works of art.¹

For a Muslim to respect and honour Christ is one thing; for a Muslim to trust in him as redeemer, and identify as one of his disciples through baptism, is to repudiate the Muslim faith totally. Such a person is considered an apostate, deserving of the sentence of death, and indeed, many former Muslims have been killed as a result of placing their faith in Christ and being baptised in his name.

¹ This was the infamous “Virgin in a condom” exhibited at Te Papa in 1998. It consisted of a statuette of the virgin Mary with a condom stretched over it. Its artistic merit escaped many people.

Similarly, for an orthodox Jew to believe in Christ as the Jewish Messiah, and to be baptised in his name, is considered apostasy from the Jewish religion. While such believers are not usually killed as a result of their new faith, often their families consider them to be dead, and some go as far as conducting a funeral service for the person. Many Jewish believers have been attacked and persecuted for their faith, a common occurrence in Israel today, where to be a Jewish believer in Jesus, who has been baptised, is to suffer discrimination, physical violence, and social ostracism, often without any legal remedy and even with the complicity of the authorities.

Similarly, Hindus who become Christians and are baptised can suffer as a result. For a Hindu, it is acceptable to include Jesus in the pantheon of gods alongside all the other millions of Hindu gods. Hindus can accept Jesus on their own terms and consider him one of many incarnations of the gods. But to place faith in Christ, and to be baptised in his name, is to reject the Hindu assessment of Christ as one of a vast number of equivalent gods, and to accept Christ alone as the incarnation of the one and only God. Hindu radicals also engage in active persecution of Christians in India, burning churches, harassing, beating and even killing Christians, as many frequent reports have made evident.

We can see then that many people around the world see baptism as the final step in casting off a former religion, to accept Christ only as their redeemer and Lord, and the only incarnation of the one true God. But we also see that in westernised countries like New Zealand, baptism is a somewhat harmless ritual that has minimal significance, if any at all, to the world around us. Why is it, then, that for some believers baptism involves the risk of persecution and even martyrdom, but for others, it is met with either an uncomprehending stare or a sentimental comment by non-believers. Is it not because we have lost the significance of baptism ourselves, and so because it means so little to us, it also therefore means little to anyone else? Baptism, like the other sacrament we celebrate, the eucharist, is not something to be taken lightly, but is to be approached with a sense of awe and dread. After all, it is not a human ceremony which we conduct for our own purposes, but a divinely instituted ceremony in which we meet face to face with God himself. In accepting baptism, we are saying that we are repudiating the ways of the world that rejects God, and instead are committing ourselves, wholly and completely, to faith in God and service to him

as his disciples. Baptism is not a harmless ceremony, but a dangerous act that ought to be entered into only after strong advice as to the risks we run in so doing. God does not treat baptism lightly, and nor should we. If we are to be baptised, then we accept the full consequences of that, which is to be committed to God alone, to be living in terms of Christian discipleship, and to be at odds with the world around us because of the different life we have chosen. If we are no different to those who do not believe, what purpose then is there in baptism? If we are completely at home in the society in which we live, how then can we fellowship with God, whose commandments that same society is engaged in violating on a daily, or hourly, or even minute-by-minute basis?

What then makes baptism so dangerous for us? Let us recall for a moment what happened at the time of the baptism of Jesus. John was baptising in the Jordan, calling the people of Israel to repentance for their sins, and urging them to prepare in this way for the coming of the one who would save them. His message was not a polite request to those who were so inclined, but a scathing attack on those who were resistant to what he was saying. Listen to his words, and imagine how you would react if you were on the receiving end: “You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the coming wrath? Produce fruit in keeping with repentance.” In other words, don’t just go through the motions like others you see around you, give some evidence you truly have repented. And don’t put your trust in your parentage either. The Jews were proud of their descent from Abraham, the man of faith. But listen to what John said about that: “Do not think you can say to yourselves, we have Abraham as our father. I tell you that out of these stones God can raise up children for Abraham.” So that won’t do either. Don’t think you can get away with saying, I am a Presbyterian, my parents were Presbyterians, and their parents before them. I come from a long line of church-goers. As far as God is concerned, that counts for absolutely **nothing**. God can make as many Presbyterians as he needs out of the stones. He is not interested in your parentage, he is not interested in your affiliation with this or that church, he is only interested in whether or not you have **faith**.

Baptism for John was intrinsically linked with the coming judgement. As he said to the Pharisees, who warned you to flee from the coming wrath? The Pharisees were not expecting any sudden acts of God’s judgement, things were just going on much as

they had done for ages. So why did they turn up for baptism by John? What expectation did they have that judgement was near, that they needed to repent in order to escape from it? Likewise, do we see baptism as a means of escape from God's judgement? Who gave us any such expectation that baptism by itself would do any good? Was it a prophet of God, or a Pharisee? Baptism does not save us, faith alone saves us. For us to rely on baptism without faith is worse than useless, because it is a claim on salvation, and an expectation of salvation, to which we are not entitled, and provides not only no security at all, it gives a false sense of security that conceals the fact that we are liable to God's severest wrath!

Not only did John speak of the judgement to come for all who did not repent, he also spoke in fearsome terms of the one whose coming they were preparing by repentance. He came not to bring peace and safety, but to initiate the time of God's judgement on all who would not believe. John said of him, that is, of Jesus, "*His winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing floor, gathering his wheat into the barn and burning up the chaff with unquenchable fire.*" Hardly the gentle Jesus, meek and mild, whom we are accustomed to imagine! Baptism is intrinsically linked to the judgement of God, not on its own as a means of escape from judgement, but as a sign of repentance and faith that alone can free us from falling under the anger of God.

Jesus was baptised by John, not because he needed to repent, because he alone was sinless and forever remains so, but because by so doing he identified himself with those whom he came to save. It was something that showed the grace of God in Christ, that he was willing to submit to baptism by John, who recognised that Jesus was greater than him. And the seal of God's approval came when after his baptism, the Holy Spirit came on Jesus in the form of a dove, and the voice of the Father spoke from heaven saying, "*This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased.*" Jesus thus then received the anointing of the Holy Spirit for his ministry, and his calling by God was confirmed before all who witnessed it.

In baptism, we identify with Christ who also was baptised. Baptism thus links us inextricably with Christ: we become united with him, joined with him, bound together with him. In Romans 6 we read: "*Don't you know that all of us who were baptised into Christ Jesus were baptised into his death? We were therefore buried with him through baptism into death in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead*

through the glory of the Father, we too may live a new life. If we have been united with him like this in his death, we will certainly also be united with him in his resurrection. For we know that our old self was crucified with him so that the body of sin might be done away with, that we should no longer be slaves to sin - because anyone who has died has been freed from sin.” This then indicates what it means to be baptised: it is to be joined together with Christ, so that his life becomes our life, and our lives become his life. He lives in us, and lives through us, so that we no longer live our own lives, but live his life in us and through us. Therefore, the lives that we live are not our own, but are the life of Christ living in the world in us and through us.

To be joined together with Christ means that what befell him will also befall us. We have been warned not to be surprised if we suffer persecution, because the disciple is not above his master. As he suffered for his obedience to God, so we too may suffer for our obedience to God. As he was abused and mocked by those who are rebelling against God, so we too can expect to be abused and mocked by rebels today. As he was killed, so we too may be killed, more so in some countries than others. But as we read in Corinthians, as we are united together in Christ, so obviously then we are all united with each other, and as one part of the body suffers, so too all parts of the body suffer. After all, if you have a deadly disease, you don't say that my liver or my heart is diseased and dying, but the rest of me is fine! If a part is sick, the whole is sick. As part of the body suffers in countries where faith in Christ is akin to a death sentence, so too we suffer as our fellow believers suffer. If conversely, we are apathetic and indifferent to our faith, and neglect to grow in obedience and deepen our discipleship, the rest of the body suffers because of our lack of faith and commitment.

If our union with Christ means that we then share with him in his blessings, then as he died and rose again from the dead, so we too who trust in him will, if we die before he comes again, also rise again from the dead. To reject the resurrection of Christ is to reject our own resurrection: after all, if it was not good enough for Christ, it is not good enough for us either, and we are the most miserable of creatures because we trust in a lie. But we can have confidence in God, because Christ **was** raised from the dead, and as he was raised, so too we also will be raised. This is why baptism is such a dividing line between those who believe and those who do not: it is a confession that God has, as Peter said to Cornelius and his household, confirmed that Christ is indeed

the one whom God has appointed as Lord and Redeemer by raising him from the dead. In baptism we confess that God has raised him from the dead, as baptism unites us with Christ in his death and in his resurrection. This is true for no other prophet, no other religious leader, no other messiah, no other guru. Christ and Christ alone has certainly been raised from the dead as the proof that he is God's chosen one through whom we must be saved. By baptism we proclaim his death and resurrection as God's only son, thus repudiating the claims made by the Muslims, by the Jews, by the Hindus, by the Buddhists, by every other religion the world has ever known or will know. And this is why baptism is the dividing line in countries where those religions predominate: it is a repudiation of what the majority of people in those countries believe, and this is enough to initiate persecution and martyrdom for those bold enough to confess faith in Christ and be baptised.

But what then of us? Why is it that we are not similarly persecuted for our faith? Surely Christianity is no less of a threat to the secular religions of our society than it is to Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism and so on. Yes, that is true, Christianity is a powerful threat to secular societies such as ours, because it challenges and refutes the basis on which our society is built: that human beings can by their own efforts construct a society which is fair, just, equitable and free, without any reference to God, to his commandments, to his forgiving grace and his redeeming power in Christ. We do not need God, we say in our secular society: we can manage alright on our own, thank you very much. In spite of all the evidence to the contrary, we persist in the view that we can live without God, and thus we persist in rebellion against him. We reject the very idea that it is only in the Scriptures, only governed and directed by faith in God, that our society can find the right path to follow. But it is true, and remains true, that only in acknowledging God and turning away from the deceits and conceits of our own deluded and degenerate imaginations, can we truly know what it means to do justice, to exercise mercy, to care for the poor, the sick and the handicapped. All other conceptions of justice, mercy and care will be distorted and riddled with the rot that will lead to their own destruction, because only through faith in God can we truly live the way we are meant to live.

So then, if Christianity is such a powerful force in confronting the false and idolatrous religions of the east and the west, Hinduism, Islam and Buddhism on the one hand,

and humanism, secularism and new age paganism on the other, why are Christians so powerless against them? Is it not because we no longer know what it means for us to be committed to Christ, to be radically separate from those who do not believe, to be prepared to live differently from them and in confrontation with their idolatrous faith? Do we not conform in most respects to the way of life of those we see around us? But does not baptism mark us off from those who do not believe? Does it not unite us with the saviour who was put to death by the world, yet died for the world? Does it not join us with him who was buried, yet was raised again from the dead by the power of God and thereby confirmed to be God's appointed saviour and the one and only Lord? Does it not promise that as he was indeed truly raised bodily from the dead on the third day, that we also who believe in him will be raised bodily from the dead at his return? Do we not then live in between the death of the old life and the beginning of eternal life with Christ? Why then do we live as do the unbelievers?

Let us then take solemn heed to our baptism, and grasp the enormity of what we have done. Let us be conscious of the risk we have taken in baptism in choosing to stand with God against the world which is in rebellion against him, and which rejects his rule and his commands. Let us be bold to confront the world and expose its errors and its deceits by living in the truth, in justice, mercy, grace and peace. Let us be brave to resist those who rebel against God, who persecute and kill his servants when they stand in their way. So may the God of Justice and Peace, who vindicated his servant Jesus by raising him from the dead, grant us the grace to live out the baptism that marks us separate from the world, and sustain us when we are attacked as a result.