

First Sunday after the Epiphany

Occasion: The Baptism of our Lord

Sunday, January 13, 2019

Year (cycle): C

This Sunday is all about baptism. By water, by fire, with the Holy Spirit. Holy Eucharist and Holy Baptism are the two most important sacraments of the Church. Baptism is the way to salvation through Jesus Christ, and the entrance into the Christian community from the very beginnings of the Church.

In the first days of the church, only those who were serious about joining the community of Christ were given the entrance rite of baptism. And then only after about three years of study, getting to know the community, and proving beyond the shadow of doubt that the new member of the church wouldn't turn the community in to the Romans.

Worship took place at the homes of the community members. The Word was read, and interpreted. Prayers were offered. The order of service was not that much different that it is today in the liturgical churches. With one very distinct difference, only those who had been baptized were permitted to participate, or even witness, the Eucharist. Often the house was divided from the public area from the private, Eucharistic room. There was often a baptismal font that was waist deep,

and large enough for several adults to stand around while one was immersed and blessed by the celebrant. The postulants were dressed in white robes, and after proclaiming their faith, they were led into the water, immersed and blessed. Then they were permitted to enter into the inner room where they would dry off, get dressed and join the community for the Eucharistic feast. This was a full meal, with the features of bread and wine and the words of consecration. It would be the most memorable and life changing moment in the life of a Christian.

Infant baptism, now a common practice, has been in the main stream at least from the second century, even earlier in Egypt. It has come to be a consecration of the baby, with adults taking the baptismal vows on behalf of the child, and promising to bring the child up as a follower of Christ. This practice was strengthened by the belief that baptism is necessary for salvation. Concern for the salvation of a sick child in the times of frequent infant and child mortality made infant baptism acceptable to everyone who otherwise had reason to speak against it.

Confirmation became the action the child took as he or she became an adult, taking the vows themselves, and entering the community of Christ as an adult.

In our time, the discussion continues between factions, should we wait until the adult has accepted Christ as Lord and Savior before baptism – or should parents be

allowed, even encouraged to baptize a child as an infant? Our church, accepts both infant and adult baptism as the sacrament that identifies the individual as a member of the community of Christ.

As there is more interest in the very early Church, more and more Episcopal churches are building fonts large enough to accommodate at least two adults, with enough room for one to be immersed by the celebrant. The majority of churches still have a baptismal font, like ours, that holds enough water to permit the celebrant to pour water over the head of the candidate. We also use oils that have been consecrated by the bishop called chrism to seal the newly baptized as Christ's own forever. Only one baptism is necessary in one's life. It should always be a community experience. Individuals who are given emergency baptisms are brought to the community of the church, so the community can be a witness to this major event in the life of the individual.

On the internet, there are beautiful scenes of multiple baptisms held within the living water of the font, with people of all ages presented, immersed, blessed and welcomed by a joyful community. I can almost see John the Baptist at the waters of the Jordan through these experiences, with the witnesses on the side, and the proselytes dressed in white, waiting for their passage into a new life.

When Jesus came to the River to be baptized with water, His baptism was public, among both those who sought remission of sins, as well as those converted from the pagan gods to the Living God of the Jews. His baptism was for neither purpose, but to signify the beginning of his ministry, and preparation for the vocation of Messiah. After he was baptized, the skies opened, and the embodiment of the Holy Spirit in the form of a dove descended over His head. God spoke pronouncing, , “This is my Son, in whom I am well pleased.” Father, Son, and Holy Spirit acting together, as Jesus embarked on the journey we call the Jesus Movement. The journey we are still on with Him today.

Baptism with water spread throughout the Holy Lands. We hear how the apostles brought the Holy Spirit to the Samaritans through laying on of hands. The faith and fire that these followers of Christ brought with them, enlivened those who would join the community of Christ.

We know that the Spirit continues to act in our time. We receive the laying on of hands at times in our lives that are significant. At confirmation, at times of sickness or death, for some at ordination. As a recipient of Laying on of Hands, I can tell you the experienced is filled with power. As we touch each other, the spirit is

communicated from one to another. Healers, and those who have been healed, experience the power of the divine.

Our scriptures talk of the fire of the spirit. Fire is one way to purify, but it is filled with pain and destruction. Walking through fire is dangerous, life threatening. But God promises we will not be consumed. We will be made pure. We are the Beloved of God.

“Because you are precious in my sight, and honoured, and I love you.”

In a few moments, we will renew our own baptismal vows. I invite you to let these words strengthen each one of you in your faith. Spend some time this week, reviewing how these words have changed your life, and how you are still living into the promises.