

15<sup>th</sup> January 2012. Cathedral Evensong.

Theme: The Baptism of Christ.

Matt 3:13-16. Jesus came to John to be baptised by him. John tried to dissuade him. “Do you come to me?” he said “I need rather to be baptised by you.” Jesus replied, “let it be so for the present; we do well to conform in this way with all that God requires.”

About two months ago, my devout and lovely Kenyan hostess, who, for various reasons to do with Kenyan Luo custom, calls me her “uncle”, took me to the pentecostal church of which she and her husband are members. After much dancing and singing, backed by a very powerful amplifier, all those present for the first time were asked to come forward and introduce themselves. Jane led me to the front and I told the congregation, very briefly, where I come from and what I do in the Cathedral parish. I was then asked when Jesus had come into my life. I knew what the questioner meant – preferably a specific date on which I had received a charismatic blessing. But as an old fashioned Anglican, I chose to reply, “In September 1937,” as I recalled the first two questions and responses in the catechism:

“What is your name?”

“N or M” (I found this a bit confusing until I was advised that this was a code for Name or Names)

“Who gave you this Name?”

“My Godfathers and Godmother in my Baptism: wherein I was made a member of Christ, the child of God, and an inheritor of the kingdom of heaven.”

And I recalled the questions which come a little later in the Catechism:

“What dost thou chiefly learn by the[se] commandments?”

“I learn two things: my duty towards God, and my duty towards my neighbour.”

“What is thy duty towards God?”

“[It] is to believe in him, to fear him, and to love him, with all my heart, with all my mind, with all my soul, and with all my strength ....”

“What is thy duty towards thy Neighbour?”

“[It] is to love him as myself, and to do to all men as I would they should do unto me .... and to do my duty in that state of life, unto which it shall please God to call me.”

I was about thirteen when I learned the Catechism as the core teaching of the Anglican church in preparation for Confirmation, though I must confess that I had to do some revision for the precise wording in my SAPB when I started reading for this sermon.

My response to my Pentecostal questioner, while, in a sense, not the answer to the question as he would have understood it, was a true one. The exchange between Jesus and John prior to the baptism of Jesus – and the observed events which followed – reflect both the liturgical and the charismatic elements in Baptism; the moment when the will of God for all of us, meets the will of our parents, godparents and, ultimately ourselves.

John's immediate response to the request Jesus makes reflects the context of his ministry – baptism is the symbolic washing away of sins following repentance by the “candidate”. St John the evangelist has the Baptist saying, “Look, there is the Lamb of God; it is He who takes away the sin of the world.” The perfect sacrifice has nothing of which to repent, no sin to be confessed or washed away – so is in no need of any “baptism of repentance”.

Jesus does not contradict the Baptist, but says, “Let it be so for the present: we do well to conform in this way with all that God requires.” This is what we might call a liturgical or even ritual response. We do not have to attend communal worship in order to conform to the requirements of the two Great Commandments, let alone recite them with a clear voice before witnesses – but by doing so, we affirm our own commitment, we support each other in that commitment to do so, and also make clear to those who have not made that commitment exactly what it means to be a Christian. By conforming to the “baptism of repentance” which John proclaimed, Jesus was symbolically and publicly validating the Baptist's ministry – just as John, by his proclaiming Jesus as “the Lamb of God” was affirming the ministry that was yet to unfold.

Infant baptism is the public recognition that, even before we are fully conscious of more than our very basic biological needs and maybe our mother and others who meet those needs, God loves us and asks that we be brought up to respond creatively and fully to that love. “I was made a member [that is, a limb, an essential part] of Christ, the child of God, and an inheritor of the kingdom of heaven.” what an extra-ordinary set of claims! This deal between God and our sponsors is not just an offer to properly conceived and nicely dressed babies like most of us were – the offer is made to the most wretched of children, brutally conceived and unwanted by their impoverished and immature mothers. It is the first, public, recognition of what Roy Barker often said was his only sermon, “You are here because God loves you – all else is commentary.”

“Confirmation” is simply that – another public statement, this time by ourselves, that we confirm that we accept those gifts of love and life that we received unconsciously (if not always silently!) at Baptism. The liturgical setting underlines the seriousness of our intentions - and the blessing of the Church, through the hands of the Bishop, emphasises that our public acceptance of God's gifts to us is to be taken with total commitment, and that our wholehearted response to that love will not always be easy for us.

The New Testament provides us with two strikingly different accounts of the process whereby adult men were “baptised” and “confirmed”. Fairly early on in his ministry, Jesus identified Peter as being a potential leader of the infant church. His declaration to Peter, “You are Peter, the Rock, and on this rock I shall build my church.” was the baptism for Peter – the affirmation that God loved him and had a great task for him to do. But as John the Evangelist tells the story, being chosen is not the same as being committed, and Peter makes a fool of himself up to the point of denying all knowledge of his Master and his Friend. Peter's confirmation comes in the last chapter of John's gospel when Jesus leads Peter through his own personal Catechism, asking the question, “Do you love

me?” and Peter, transcending his pain and guilt, replies in the affirmative – three times. He never looks back – his speech to the crowd on the day of Pentecost is not simply an outpouring of tongues of ecstasy, it is an act of tremendous personal courage by the man who was instructed at his confirmation to “feed my sheep” and “feed my lambs”. Saul of Tarsus, whose name was also changed, following his baptism by the Holy Spirit on the road to Damascus, and his instruction by the disciple Ananias, was a scholarly charismatic – a man whose eyes were opened by his being temporarily blinded and who regained his vision through his commitment to that experience of blindness. Saul of Tarsus was, so to speak, “confirmed” on the road to Damascus before being “baptised” with the name of Paul. The courage and steadfastness of Peter following his own special “confirmation” and the visionary enthusiasm of Paul following his overwhelming experiences of the love of God, were the twin pillars on which the Church was established and carried to the uttermost parts of the known world.

We are heirs to those great traditions, whether we became “a member of Christ, the child of God and an inheritor of the kingdom of heaven” through the stumbling path of Peter and the liturgy, or the blinding insight granted to Paul. In the parish where I was baptised and confirmed, my father used to count the collection each week – a substantial part of it came in “Duplex” envelopes, with two compartments marked “Maintenance” and “Extension”. “Maintenance” went into the running expenses of the parish, “Extension” went to support outreach and, especially, missionary work. As with liturgy and charisma, Peter and Paul, order and enthusiasm, the two halves of those envelopes were both essential in sustaining the life and growth of the Church, for without life, there is no growth, and without growth there is no life.

My prayer for us all tonight is that we live together in orderly harmony and that we grow together with enthusiasm, as members of Christ, the children of God and inheritors of the kingdom of heaven – renewed by the many gifts of the Holy Spirit.

Amen