

I have something to say about baptism, not all there is to say but enough to be helpful in deepening our understanding and appreciation of this most basic Christian sacrament.

When I was a student at CDSB, I took a course from the Jesuits in sacramental theology. The Roman Catholics have seven sacraments we non-Romans have two. Regardless of the number, there are two basic methods which can be used to analyze and understand them one is the Christological method which emphasizes the vertical dimension i.e. a sacramental act like baptism is performed on earth. This will cause some corresponding event in heaven, the person will be identified as a Christian. But there is an earthly effect too. The person becomes part of the faith community, nourished by the church on earth and in turn nourishing other Christians. Sacraments are not isolated events. They affect other people.

As baptized Christians we begin to experience life in this material world through the faith and value system of the church, of which we are now a part.

Baptism has a long and varied history. Acts chap. 8 records an encounter between Phillip and an Ethiopian who was riding in a chariot and reading from the prophet Isaiah. He asked Phillip whom the prophet was writing about. The Ethiopian came to faith and as soon as an oasis with water appeared he asked to be baptized, which Phillip was glad to do.

This would not have happened 150 years later. The Roman government had turned against the church seeing it as a “disloyal and criminal organization” according to Dr. Massey Shepherd, our professor of liturgics.

The govt. Tried to infiltrate the church and destroy it from the inside. It encouraged people to make false confessions of faith and seek baptism which would make them able to inform the authorities so that they could arrest church leaders. But the church responded by establishing the “catechism” a period of about a year in which the new convert would learn church doctrine and practice before being baptized. During this time the church would also vet the candidate to see if he/she were sincere.

There were times when catechumens would delay their baptism until near their death, believing that if they should happen to sin following baptism they would be eternally damned.

And we all know of forced baptisms in times and places of antisemitism the sacrament of baptism has, sometimes had a rough and twisting road to travel. I looked up baptism on the internet. I learned that the *mikvah* was religious washing

for those who sought ritual purification. But baptism was part of the textual manufacturing process. Cloth was soaked in bleach, then in water, then dried and finally soaked in the dye of the color it would be sold retail. There is no specifically religious connotation but the process does allow for profound change as religious baptism might bring about. A woman in one of St. Paul's churches was named Lydia. She was a seller of purple.

Baptism could result in humble cloth for everyday people or for clothing for royalty - baptism and observable change.

John's purpose in baptism was fruits that were evidence of repentance. Luke 3 reports a dialogue between the Baptist and his hearers. They asked what these fruits might be. He said that publicans should cease charging excess taxes and soldiers should quit bullying the civilian population. Obvious changes in behavior that evidenced a change of heart. Mystery of baptism outward and visible and inward and spiritual, if invisible.

Why did Jesus go out to hear John and offer himself for baptism? I believe that Jesus was a devout man active in his synagogue, a student of scripture, a bit of a spiritual seeker. I envision him to be like many of the Protestant Christians who attended the Billy Graham crusades. He went to strengthen his relationship with God.

I have no idea whether at that point whether he had any sense of messianic calling or not. The voice from heaven and the descent of the spirit as a dove would have been an extremely powerful almost devastating religious experience. He had to spend extended time in the wilderness to come to terms with it. He was never the same again. I believe this must have been the basis of his messianic calling. We think of Jesus as sinless. Why would he respond to a demand for repentance? The Greek word we translate repentance simply means "change your mind or "reconsider" there is no necessary demand for regret or remorse. Perhaps Jesus gained a deeper insight a greater appreciation for some of the reasons behind some of the laws, therefore more joy in his worship

An individual may be baptized at any age. Many in the Episcopal church call the sacrament a "rite of initiation," it is public, it involves a specific liturgy of water and vows made by the individual or on their behalf by parents or godparents. It is a liturgy of action with a specific purpose.

Earlier I said that there is a certain element of mystery associated with this sacrament. I believe that is true.

It is related to the role and action of the Holy Spirit. Jesus told Nicodemus that the spirit is like the wind it blows where it wills. We can invite its presence, invoke its name but we cannot control it.

The spirit becomes evident in baptism as the baptized continue to participate and grow in the life of the church and display the kinds of loving behavior the Baptist called for. Where the spirit of the Lord is. There is the one true church.

Preached by
The Rev. David Cavanagh
Grace Episcopal Church
Fairfield, CA
January 8, 2017