

Column – Baptism (Coventry)

It's been a few years since I have been there, but I have always enjoyed visiting Coventry Cathedral in England. The shell of the old cathedral, destroyed in a German air raid in 1940, stands adjacent to the new cathedral opened in 1962.

The new building contains not only the main worship space – the nave, chancel, and high Altar -- but a number of smaller chapels. One is the Chapel of Unity. It was included as a means of binding together all those who profess Christian faith across denominational lines.

An interesting feature of the Chapel of Unity is its proximity to a great baptismal font created from a boulder brought from a hillside near Bethlehem in the Holy Land. Looking out from the chapel, the font is what one sees. This is no accident. After all, baptism is a rite practiced by all Christians, with perhaps the exception of the Friends (Quakers) and the Salvation Army.

Despite its universality, I don't think we Christians give this Sacrament of the Gospel enough attention. What does it signify?

There are a number of answers we can give, the first being death. Baptism is a sort of death to an old way of life and a rebirth to a new. No matter how the rite is administered, we pass through a watery grave.

Secondly, baptism speaks of life. Jesus, following a pattern that began with our first parent Adam, died, but He did not remain in that state. On the third day, God the Father raised Him up. In our baptism, this victory is reckoned to us by way of sign and symbol.

Thirdly, baptism speaks of cleansing. As water washes off the filth of the body, so it cleanses our souls of sin. Imagine yourself covered with mud and a hose being directed onto you. Well, something like this happens when a person is baptised.

The Old Testament prophet Ezekiel, writing some 570 years before Christ, foresaw God cleansing His people and renewing their hearts: “I [God] will sprinkle clean water upon you, and ye shall be clean: from all your filthiness and from all your idols, will I cleanse you” (Ezekiel 36:25).

Fourthly, as I have already hinted, baptism speaks of union with Christ. “For if we have been planted together [buried] in the likeness of his death, we shall be also in the likeness of his resurrection,” writes Paul in Romans 6:5. In view of his words in this verse, what is true of the King (Jesus) is true of his people. Baptism pictures and enacts solidarity with Christ.

Finally, baptism speaks of deliverance . . . of being translated from one kingdom to another. In the days of Moses, the children of Israel escaped the slavery of Egypt by passing through the water of the Red Sea. This deliverance by water prefigured an even greater deliverance: the deliverance that would come by Jesus Christ. Baptism then is our Red Sea moment.

Some of you reading these words may never have been baptised. You have made no profession of Christian faith. In your heart, though, you long for cleansing and deliverance and a new start. To you I would say, why not consider – perhaps for the first time – the claims of Christ and be baptised without delay?

Grant, O Lord, that as we are baptised into the death of thy blessed Son, our Saviour Jesus Christ, so by continual mortifying our corrupt affections, we may be buried with him; and that through the grave, and gate of death, we may pass to our joyful resurrection; for his merits, who died, and was buried, and rose again for us, the same thy Son Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

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