

Trinity 6

I take as my text today from St. Paul's Epistle to the Romans:

....we are buried with him by Baptism into death: that like as Christ was raised up from the dead by the glory of the Father, even so we also should walk in newness of life.

Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be always acceptable in Thy Sight, O Lord my Strength and my Redeemer.

Baptism! What is it? What is its significance, its necessity? Is it just an initiation into a particular church or denomination, to be repeated time and again? Or is it something more? The answer to these questions is both simple and complex, as may be expected.

So to begin, we may easily state that Baptism is the basic rite of Christianity, but, at the same time, it evokes misunderstanding as to its purpose, its effect, its meaning, and, even, its religious necessity.

As Anglicans, we draw upon our Catholic heritage, for, indeed, we are Catholic, Anglican Catholic, and, as such, we believe in the sacramental nature of Baptism. We accept it as indelible, with the full understanding that it is Baptism that makes us a Christian.

It is Baptism that makes us a Christian — again, makes us a Christian.

While the first step is professing a profound belief in Jesus Christ as Lord and Saviour, Baptism is the second step that effects a profound change in our nature where that profession is brought to fruition.

The profound change is a death to sin and a rebirth as a new person in Jesus Christ. We are signed with the Cross in the Name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Indelibly signed. We may not be able to see it but on our forehead is a Cross that marks us as a Christian.

But there's more to the Baptism we undergo. Something very special that, apparently, only those who embrace their Catholic Heritage can fully understand — its Sacramental nature.

To better understand what we're taking about, let's revisit the story of Nicodemus in St John's Gospel, how he came in the night to visit Jesus. There was this remarkable exchange between Jesus and Nicodemus:

Rabbi, we know that art a teacher come from God: for no man can do these miracles that thou doest, except God be with him. Jesus answered and said unto him, Verily, verily, I say unto thee, Except a man be born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God. Nicodemus saith unto him, How can a man be born when he is old? can he enter a second time into his mother's womb, and be born? Jesus answered, Verily, verily, I say unto thee, Except a man be born of water and of the Spirit, he cannot enter into the kingdom of God.

And the passage concludes with:

And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of man be lifted up: that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have eternal life.

With this passage from St. John recounting the encounter of Jesus with Nicodemus, we can begin to see the roadway to eternal life with God laid out before us and the Sacramental nature of Baptism.

To continue, we turn to St. Paul, who, in his Letter to the Romans, gives further insight.

According to Paul, as Christ died on the Cross bearing our sin, so, in Baptism, we are joined to his death. Through the water of Baptism, we die with him; we die to sin.

Then, just as he was resurrected, so we emerge from the water of Baptism alive again, freed from sin, indeed, born again as a child of God.

We do not literally die in Baptism but, because of the New Covenant sealed in Christ's Blood, we can die in a figurative sense, just as we do in the Eucharist when we offer ourselves as Living Sacrifices.

So, we find in Baptism three realities:

Baptism is a sacrament, one of two necessary for salvation, and a commandment of our Lord. He was baptized, and He commanded His disciples to go out into the world preaching the Good News, the Gospel, and baptizing in the Name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.

Baptism is indelible. Through it, we are marked as Christians. We bear the sign of the Cross for eternity. Once only are we cleansed through the water of regeneration and made as newborns to begin a spiritual journey homeward to our Heavenly Father.

Baptism alone brings us into sacramental conformity with Christ. That is, only when made a Christian through **Baptism** can we enjoy the *Sacraments of the Church*. It is the gateway, that enables us to participate in the other *Sacraments*.

Indeed, in the particular passage from his Epistle to the Romans that we read today, St. Paul specifically addresses this reality, that is, **Baptism** as a means of being brought into sacramental conformity with Christ.

Here, Paul responds to a perversion of the *Doctrine of Grace* — a perversion associated with Gnosticism, one of the great heresies.

Earlier Paul had asserted that where sin abounds, grace super-abounds, which he expounded as his doctrine of *Justification by Grace*.

However, this assertion brought about an argument that attempted to undermine this doctrine.

The argument followed, thusly:

If God's Grace is so great that it forgives us of all our sins, it must be a wonderful thing. If it is such a wonderful thing, then the more we sin, the more Grace will abound. Thus sin doesn't matter, since God will forgive us anyway through His Grace. Indeed, we could say that sin is an excellent

thing, since it allows for God's Grace to operate more and more.

St. Paul is taken aback by this incredible argument, an argument suggesting that we should pursue such a course in our lives of deliberate sin, a course that completely ignores what happens in **Baptism**.

At this point, the Apostle launches into a discourse, using language that those of his day would easily understand; even today we can grasp the concept he is presenting.

The concept is that we must die in order to live.

Paul, just as Jesus did in his parables, uses the familiar to illustrate his argument.

Knowing the customs of the religions of the day, for example, the Jewish ritual for a Gentile convert, even the rituals from the Greek mystery religions, Paul has a basis from which to explain this throwing off of the old life and the taking on of a new life in Christ.

First of all, the basic concept of **Baptism** is not without precedent: for example, when a Gentile convert entered the Jewish religion, three things were involved in the ritual: *sacrifice*, *circumcision*, and **Baptism**.

In the Jewish form of **Baptism**, the person was totally immersed in the Baptismal bath so that the water touched every part of the body. When the person emerged from the bath, he was regenerated: a totally new person and referred to as a child just born, the child of one day.

All his sins were canceled under the precept that God could not punish a person for sins committed before he was born. From this time on, the man was a new person, and it was Jewish custom that he would be considered the first-born.

Even the mystery religions followed rituals that mirrored the concept of being born again, where the person was released from the encumbrances of this world as they were united with some god.

So, for those who Paul was addressing, the concept was familiar. Of course, the meaning associated with each group was quite different, and Christianity represented a radical departure from all the religions of the ancient world.

Now, faced with the premise that if sin produced forgiveness through God's Grace, so that the more sin there was, the more God's **Grace** would abound, Paul countered by explaining what happened to the person in *Christian Baptism*.

Significantly, in the early days of Christianity, most converts were adults, and most were converting from a pagan religion. Individuals were leaving families, in many cases, and thus **were** beginning a new life.

A confession of faith and a lengthy period of instruction preceded **Baptism**. It was a momentous occasion in a person's life and represented a radical change.

Now, when a person is baptized, says St. Paul, they die to one kind of life and rise to another; they die to a life of sin and rise to a life of grace. They are reborn as a child of God.

The Christian, then, is committed to a different kind of life.

Moreover, what happens to the individual in **Baptism**, dead to sin and alive with Christ, reflects the present state, not the future.

For St. Paul, it is a truth, an article of our faith, that, as Christ was raised up from death, so we shall be raised up from the death of sin; that as Christ lives forever, so shall we.

How can this be?

It can be because of the work of our Lord Jesus Christ. His death on the *Cross* was to destroy sin; to make an atonement for it. With His **Resurrection**, He lives to promote the *Glory of God*, to make intercession for us with the Father, to be a living example for us.

In **Baptism**, we are united to Christ in His death, we die to sin. From Paul's point of view, our old nature, our sinfulness, is crucified with Christ. When we emerge from **Baptism**, we are resurrected with Christ into a new life. Freed from sin, we acquire a new nature and are no longer a slave to sin — sin no longer has dominion over us; its power has been broken.

In **Baptism**, we take on an obligation to live unto righteousness; that is, we obligate ourselves to a *right relationship with God*. We do that by way of complete trust in him and total submission to him.

And we must keep in the forefront of our minds God's Love and Grace. It is something we can never earn or deserve but we can forever try to be worthy of that Love and Grace so freely given to us.

Indeed, what separates Christians from the rest of the world, from all other religions, from those who have no religion at all, is this **Grace**, bound by Love, that elicits an irresistible response, when we accept it, to emulate our Lord and Saviour.

We come to see the world from a different perspective where all of God's Creation is of worth; where life itself is sacred; where unconditional love abounds; where death is not the end, but the beginning.

Finally, in sum, we are sustained and nurtured, as Christians, through the sacramental *Breaking of Bread*, as commanded by our Lord and commemorated in the *Eucharistic Sacrifice*, whereby we are joined to his *Eternal Sacrifice* as we offer ourselves to him in a *Living Sacrifice* — all of this through **Baptism**.

Marked with the sign of faith, marked as Christians through **Baptism**, we become full partakers of God's **Grace**; we become God's adopted children and joint heirs, inheritors of the *Kingdom of Heaven*; and we become living examples of his **Love**.