

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.”

More than 2000 years have passed since our Lord issued the command to his Apostles to go out into the world and baptize all nations in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit; yet, Baptism, the basic rite of Christianity, still evokes misunderstanding as to its purpose, its effect, its meaning, and even its religious necessity.

As Anglicans, in conformity with our Catholicity, we believe in the sacramental nature of Baptism, accepting it as indelible, with the understanding that it is Baptism that makes us a Christian.

While the first step is professing a sincere 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 might well remember 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 telling of the encounter of Jesus with Nicodemus, we can begin to see the roadway to eternal life with God laid out before us.

St. Paul, in his Letter to the Romans, gives further insight.

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.

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 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.

It is Baptism that brings us into sacramental conformity with Christ.

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

Here, Paul responds to a perversion of the Doctrine of Grace.

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, a course that completely ignores what happens in Baptism.

Here, 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.

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.

As Christians, sin no longer has dominion over us. Its power has been broken.

By the profession of faith that we made in Baptism, we have renounced sin and have pledged ourselves to live to God. We have received Jesus Christ as our Saviour and have devoted ourselves to His service.

St. Paul also uses a peculiar expression in verse 5:

For if we have been planted together in the likeness of his death, we shall be also in the likeness of his resurrection:

For "planted," Paul uses a Greek word that means sown or planted together and, also, means that which sprouts or springs up together. It refers to plants and trees that are planted at the same time and grow up together, such as, say, a field of grain, and from that, the meaning thus would be: to be intimately connected or joined together.

In Paul's use of the word, it denotes that we and our Saviour are united intimately in His Death and Resurrection. We are to resemble Him in His death to sin where we also die to sin and in His Resurrection where as He rose from the grave so we also rise from sin being raised up to a new life.

In our lives, we are "planted" with Christ; that is, we should resemble Him, His life of obedience to the Father, and, as He lived a holy life, so should we strive to live a holy life, devoting ourselves to the good fight in God's service.

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.

We can never earn or deserve God’s love and grace; but we can forever try to be worthy of that love and grace so freely given to us.

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.

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.

Marked with the sign of faith through Baptism, we are full partakers of God’s Grace, inheritors of the Kingdom of Heaven, and living examples of His Love.