**Sermon**

This week, I’ve found myself feeling distinctly human. I found myself perhaps more alarmed by the spread of the virus than I have at other times and I struggled to understand how opening churches squared with the message to stay at home. I then found myself more sensitive to all sorts of other things - the political and social tensions being reported from around the world had deeper resonance, preparing for funerals seemed more personal, the challenges of climate change more pressing and then when someone hacked my Facebook account, well, that was the last straw!

This morning’s Gospel reading perhaps draws us away from the concerns of this world and to more heavenly concerns – how we might connect with God, even when everything else around us seems to be crumbling. (PIC 1) If the reading seems a little familiar, well that is because we only had it a few weeks ago – this sometimes happens when we follow the lectionary and this time of year can lead to a concentration of John the Baptist readings, as we remember John preparing the way for Jesus as an Advent theme, and then Jesus’ identity being revealed at his baptism as an Epiphany theme.

The identity of Jesus and the role of John the Baptist are clearly important themes in this reading, but when paired with our first reading from Acts, the focus is not so much set on Christology, but more on the nature and significance of baptism – of the connection of God with His creation, of Heaven coming down to Earth. And as such, it seemed an appropriate and hopeful reading for these times.

The meaning of the word “baptism” can probably be traced back to the Greek “*báptisma*”, meaning to immerse or sink or wash, but in the context of the Gospel writers it would have been understood to refer specifically to ritual washing. John the Baptist’s “*báptisma*” was for the washing of sins and initiation into a new way of being. It was very much an outward washing with water to symbolise an inner transformation. (PIC 2) – and here you see a delightful picture of a newly baptised clergyman in the making!

What is described in our first reading from Acts, however, is different and emphasises an important development in the early church – the idea of baptism by the Holy Spirit. (PIC 3) In this reading, St Paul encounters Christians who have taken their understanding of baptism from what John the Baptist had taught them and Paul instructs them that they are missing something. John pointed towards Jesus and baptism in Jesus is to be washed not just by water, but by the Holy Spirit. In some ways, Paul is telling them that they need an upgrade!

There are clearly many different ways of understanding baptism. The model that is described in Acts is not dissimilar to what we have inherited in the Anglican church – initial baptism with water, often when we are very young, followed by Confirmation, which involves the Bishop laying hands on us and praying that we would receive the Holy Spirit. Other denominations follow a very different model, with some only practicing adult baptism (or believers’ baptism) (PIC 4), some seeing only baptism by the spirit as significant and some teaching about baptism by blood – a martyr’s baptism.

Unsurprisingly, such differences have led to significant conflicts in the past and, again, vast theological works have been devoted to trying to win the argument. Yet, as with all such doctrinal debates, the question must be asked – is this really an argument that we are capable of winning?

Now, I would argue that it isn’t. Firstly, Jesus does not set out a clear doctrine of baptism in his ministry – it is not something that he explicitly instructs his followers to do and he certainly doesn’t emphasise one method over another. Secondly, many scholars believe that instructions like the “Great Commission” (PIC 5) were additions by the gospel writers or editors that reflected some of the beliefs and concerns of the early church, rather than something that Jesus stated as a missional directive. Thirdly, we must never forget that we are all limited human beings and will only ever have a partial understanding of the ways of heaven (PIC 6). To try and neatly package how we respond to God and how God can work in us is to try and constrain something that is far beyond our understanding.

For those of faith (and I think most people have a faith!) there is no denying that God can connect with us, inspire us and change us in all sorts of ways and baptism is an important part of this, but I will always resist the idea that one group has ownership of the methods or a monopoly on our understanding. St Paul speaks of the importance of baptism by the Holy Spirit, but again, this has been packaged in a way that can limit rather than expand our spiritual lives. It has led to notions that we must be born again in a particular way, including very specific signs such as speaking in tongues, casting out demons or performing acts of healing. And though such signs are not to be denied, they should never be presented as necessary features of a right relationship with God.

Baptism, like any sacrament or wilful move to God, does involve change, (PIC 7) but this change is of God’s design, not our own. We are to trust that such change is real, but we should not expect to control it or master its workings.

My experience is that when we manage to let go of the self, good things often seem to follow. When we commit to follow Jesus, to open ourselves to God and allow the Spirit to work inside us, we find that, somehow, we reflect the very best version of who we are and concerns about the World (even the virtual world!) are shown in a different light. I have no idea how this works, but it works. When we give of ourselves and allow the love of Christ and the power of the Spirit to direct us, somehow (as Tom Wright observes) we find heaven and earth joined in some way and amazing things can happen both for us and for our World.

(PIC 8) Our world certainly needs to experience the best of us at the moment, it needs us to put others first, empty ourselves of pride and greed, to be humble, and allow God’s Spirit to direct us along the right paths. We each need to play our part, wherever we are and whatever we’re capable of doing at this time – encouraging, providing, supporting, upholding, forgiving, sometimes challenging, often praying, always loving and trusting in the power of God to bring change.

Let us pray…