

Reflection on Baptism & Pentecost - Westgate 4 June, 2006. by Geoff Wraight

What we are about to do could be considered to be a bit strange.

Why do we dip people in a tank of water in front of a group of people on a cold (but beautiful) Melbourne winter morning?

What *do* Baptists believe we are doing?

What is the origin and meaning of this dramatic and symbolic act?

Good questions, glad you asked them!

The Origins of the Rite

The word baptise means simply “to dip”. That is, to dip something in something else - in this case a person in a fair bit of water.

The practice of baptism has its origins in a first century Jewish rite of ceremonial washing where people would be baptised to signify a deeper change in the direction of their lives. Often outsiders adopting Jewish faith would be baptised as a symbol of the change.

In Palestine in the first century, John the Baptist gave this Jewish rite a new meaning as he preached that to be baptised showed a desire to repent and have a change of heart and to prepare for the coming kingdom of God - even if you were already Jewish.

Jesus himself a Jew, was baptised by John - perhaps showing how fully he identified with our humanity.

The Resurrection Community of Jesus however, took this rite of baptism and extended its meaning in a new way. They took it to be a sign of identification with Christ and indeed a public witness to the fact that this person was now a follower of Jesus and belonged to the Christian community.

This meaning has stayed with the act of baptism by immersion as it was practiced in the New Testament times, the early church and through to this day.

A Drama with three Actors

It is a very graphic and dramatic act. A picture, a symbol, drama.

But it is a drama with a difference.

The differences being that the audience is one of the main actors. And secondly that this drama is depicting something that is real and true in the lives of the participants. In this sense we sometimes refer to Baptism as a sacrament – that is, a means through which we experience the grace of God.

In fact there are three actors in this drama.

1. *God,*
2. *the individual and*
3. *the community of faith.*

Lets look briefly at each of these “actors”.

The main actor in this drama is **God**, who makes real the resurrection in the lives of women and men today.

Today is the day of Pentecost. It is a special day in the life of the church celebrated 50 days after Easter. It is a day when we remember and celebrate the activity of the Spirit of God in bringing to birth the life of the Christian community.

When we speak of the Holy Spirit we simply mean the living presence of God active in creating new life and community among us.

The Spirit of God is mentioned in both the Hebrew Bible and Gospel readings we heard this morning.

In Psalm 104 – we read.. in relation to the living creatures of earth..

..if you withdrew your Spiritthey would have nothing to breathe,their bodies would quickly crumble. But when you breathe your spirit into them,life sprouts up fresh and fragrant againand the earth itself is revived.

This is the Creator Spirit of God – the ground and source of all life..not separate from creation but actively involved in it..

Then in John 15 we read..

The Spirit will come, full of truth, and will lead you by the hand into the pathways of truth.

This is the Spirit of God with whom Jesus in compete and full connection and who now works in us to lead us to truth and wisdom - who is our helper and guide..

So Which one is he? The Creator Spirit of God or the Spirit of Truth promised by Jesus?

The answer of course is both! And elsewhere we read it was the power of this same Spirit of God that raised Jesus from the dead..

God the Holy Spirit, is the one who creates faith and who not only raised Jesus from the dead but raises us from death to life and makes the resurrection a reality in our being. Or, in other words, the spirit of God enables us to choose the way of life and wholeness and reject and stand against the way of death and selfishness.

It is the Spirit of God who baptises in this sense, which is why the notion of being baptised in the Holy Spirit is often associated with this act. In some churches the idea of being baptised in the Spirit takes on a kind of hocus pocus magical meaning. But the reality is that we believe and have experienced the Spirit of God as transforming reality in someone's life - and God is still in the habit of changing people.

The second actor is the **individual person/s**. In this case Tim. A person who has made a response to the call of Christ on their lives. A personal response to the Good News of the resurrection reality. It is a turning **away** from an earlier way of life but it is equally a turning **toward** an new way of life and a new and conscious participation in the life of the Body of Christ, the church.. But we'll let Tim tell his own story of how this happened..

which brings us to the third actor..

The third actor in this drama is you, all of you - **the community of Jesus followers**.

People are not baptised by ministers, they are baptised by the community of faith, by the church. The congregation does not witness a baptism as a spectator event.

Bill will be the one getting wet today but he is acting our behalf on behalf of Westgate Baptist Community.

The congregation is active in this whole drama, bringing that person to baptism, sharing their faith commitment, itself affirming what they affirm and receiving what they receive, and celebrating their new birth.

In so doing the community receives these new members and commits itself to their ongoing care and nurture.

Finally, The material in which we do this drama is water.

Water is a very powerful yet very common and fundamental element.

It carries the symbolism of life, it carries the threat of death, it carries the notion of cleansing, and it conveys too the idea of being immersed in the community of the spirit of God..

who calls us to one faith, one baptism and one Lord.

In a moment Tim is going to come forward present himself for baptism, make some pledges and share briefly his story.

Then we will symbolise the three actors of baptism by these containers of water.

There are a smaller container and a bowl of water on the table.

The smaller container represents the life of the individual – Tim.

Tim will take this and pour it into the larger bowl of water representing the shared life of this community of Jesus here at Westgate

Then on behalf of both the community and Tim, Stacey will take the bowl and poor it into the baptistry water which represents the life of God who is the first actor in the drama and the source of all renewing and healing life in the whole creation.

In the liturgy that follows, (which is adapted from some ancient and modern sources) you will see again how the three different actors in this drama each have their part.

In the final part of the liturgy, Tim will be welcomed into membership of this community in the process of meeting around the Communion table and we will offer a blessing for him and his journey of faith..as part of the community here.

This last bit of linking baptism and membership is a really wonderful part of our Baptist heritage.. It affirms again that Christian faith and practice makes no sense except when lived out in community - thus we will conclude the service with a pledge to go on living out our baptism together as we share the love of Christ with the world around us..

May this be an opportunity for all of us to be challenge and to be re – affirmed in the baptismal commitment we share to follow Jesus and through the power of the spirit to bring peace and hope to a world of fear..

Amen.