

Reflection on Baptism - Westgate 26 June, 2005.
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 Sunday morning in the middle of winter?

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!

I'm going to explain briefly in English then Arohn will do the same in a Chin or Burmese language.

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.

As we read a moment ago, Jesus himself a Jew, was baptised by John - perhaps to show 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 difference 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 fact there are three actors in this drama.

God, the individual and the community of faith.

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

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, as put it in our preparation discussions, 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 Ellie and Emily. 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..

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.

Nancy will be the one getting wet today but she 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 Ellie and Emily are going to come forward present themselves for baptism, make some pledges and share briefly their stories.

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

There are two glasses and a bowl.

The two glasses represent the lives of the individuals Ellie and Emily.

Ellie and Emily will pour these 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 the girls I will take the bowl and pour 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.

And the one into whom we are baptised as together we are indwelt and empowered by the spirit of God to live out the good news in our neighbourhood and world.

Amen.