

# The water of baptism reveals ...

*... what it means to be declared a child of God*

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*A reflection given on the First Sunday of Epiphany, 9<sup>th</sup> January 2022 – by the Vicar the Revd Canon Jonathan Baker, in Beverley Minster*

*Luke 3:15-17, 21-22*

Our local poet, Philip Larkin once wrote a poem called Water, which goes like this.

*If I were called in  
To construct a religion  
I should make use of water.*

*Going to church  
Would entail a fording  
To dry, different clothes;*

*My liturgy would employ  
Images of sousing,  
A furious devout drench,*

*And I should raise in the east  
A glass of water  
Where any-angled light  
Would congregate endlessly*

Larkin didn't profess to be a Christian, but many of the things he appreciates about the spiritual qualities of water we can see in baptism. In particular, baptism is both a drenching in which the old life is washed away and it is a fording to try different clothes. Baptism makes a new beginning, a fresh start, a different way of life.

Last year there was a period when I was getting a regular knock on the door from two homeless men. You may have seen their tent in the Vicarage front garden for a while, and what they asked for was not for shelter, though we could point them towards agencies that might be able to help, nor did they want money, nor did they want food (although we offered it). What they particularly asked for was whether they could possibly use the shower. In order to feel human, what they needed most of all was not to have a roof over their heads or food in their bellies or money to spend, but

to feel human and hopeful and ready to face another day, they needed most of all to feel clean, even though other physical needs might have seemed more obvious.

We all of us need to feel clean. It's not for nothing that the old Victorians used to say that cleanliness was next to Godliness. And that's why baptism is a Sacrament - in the literal washing with water, there is a spiritual renewal, a sense of becoming human again, because the old nature is washed away and our true identity is revealed. I wonder whether that's something you've ever felt you needed: to be cleansed, not just outside, but on the inside; to be able to wash away the past and be cleansed of the stains of failure and disappointment; to start again and have another chance to become the person you truly are. It's not something we can do by ourselves just by trying harder - I'm not a great believer in New Year resolutions - but we have to be drenched in the waters of God's unconditional Grace, going down into it until it closes over our heads (as it were). Of course, too much water isn't necessarily a good thing. Too much water and homes and fields get flooded and people drown. So baptism also speaks of a kind of drowning, a putting to death of superficial and inadequate ways of thinking and looking and living. And I wonder whether you've been willing to do that?

In our longing for a new beginning and a fresh start, it doesn't always occur to us that before that can happen, there first has to be a 'letting-go'; a surrender; a kind of death by drowning in which we hand over control and allow ourselves to be swept off our feet, as it were, by the powerful current of God's lifegiving love. I wonder, have you allowed that to happen to you?

So baptism is a kind of death and resurrection process, and not just once only, but day by day and moment by moment as we allow the water of Grace to keep on renewing us.

And I think it's appropriate we're thinking about baptism on this day when we're beginning a new pattern of services. We may feel vulnerable and uncertain in letting go of what is familiar, but we're doing so trusting that this is the way to new life. And the reason why today's theme is that of baptism is because we're now entering the season of epiphany, celebrating how the Glory of God is revealed through his son Jesus Christ. And one of the key moments when that glory was revealed in Jesus's ministry was when he was baptised - that voice from heaven declared him to be the son of God. The Son of God was baptised not because he needed to be cleansed

and not because he needed a new beginning, but because he wanted to show solidarity with those he came to save.

Jesus's baptism with water by John anticipates his baptism by death on the cross, and he's willing to undergo that so that he in turn, can baptise you and me into his resurrection through the Holy Spirit.

And Jesus' baptism by John is a moment of revelation when the Spirit descends in the form of a Dove and the voice says, "You are my son, the Beloved." Jesus's glory is revealed because by his baptism he showed he was willing to stand alongside us in life and in death. And in doing so, he reveals how we can follow the path of life by identifying with him in his death and resurrection, and by copying him, standing alongside others whose lives are shadowed by suffering or injustice.

The water of baptism gives us a new outlook, a changed perspective, and it also reveals to us what it means to be declared a child of God.

## Reading Texts

Luke 3:15-17, 21-22

<sup>15</sup> As the people were filled with expectation, and all were questioning in their hearts concerning John, whether he might be the Messiah, <sup>16</sup> John answered all of them by saying, 'I baptize you with water; but one who is more powerful than I is coming; I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandals. He will baptize you with\* the Holy Spirit and fire. <sup>17</sup> His winnowing-fork is in his hand, to clear his threshing-floor and to gather the wheat into his granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire.'

<sup>21</sup> Now when all the people were baptized, and when Jesus also had been baptized and was praying, the heaven was opened, <sup>22</sup> and the Holy Spirit descended upon him in bodily form like a dove. And a voice came from heaven, 'You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.'