

## **On Baptism**

### **Baptism of Jesus - 10<sup>th</sup> January 2010**

#### ***Readings:***

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

I want to begin this morning by telling you a story.

**("World of Stories" 264 - Getting rid of Bats.)**

**Three ministers got together for coffee one morning. Much to their surprise they discovered that all their churches had trouble with bats infesting their belfries. The bats were making a terrible mess.**

**"I got so mad," said one minister, "that I took a shotgun and fired it at them. It made holes in the ceiling but did nothing to the bats."**

**"I tried trapping them alive," said the second, "then I drove fifty kilometres before releasing them, but they beat me back to the church."**

**"I haven't had any more problems," said the third.**

**"What did you do?" asked the others, amazed.**

**"I simply baptised them and confirmed them" he replied, "and I haven't seen them since!"**

A bit of black humour at the beginning of 2010. But I wonder. We all smile and laugh, but maybe it's because there is more than a little truth in the punch line. Although I have to admit it hasn't been my experience here at Pilgrim. But in my previous congregation, where baptism was a regular event, fewer than half were ever seen again in church. But perhaps being seen in church is not the only criterion for the efficacy of baptism. Perhaps baptism has more to do with God's actions and not the actions of the one who is baptised - that's why we baptise infants who have no idea about what's going on. And sure the parents make promises, but sadly we all make promises and they are broken - nothing unusual in that - But God's promise - so evident in the sacrament of baptism, is never broken. But, for some, it's a cute thing to do. We've domesticated baptism. It's a family gathering, where the do afterwards is the most important part of the ritual. And there's a christening gown to be bought and christening presents to be received. Oh, and then there is a church to be chosen. What about that nice one in the centre of town. And once it's done, well that's that.

**-2-**

If that's not your idea of a good baptism, then let me give you another perspective. One that I have also experience almost as much. Baptism is a disruption. It's too noisy. You come to church on a Sunday for a bit of peace and quiet and the place is abuzz. Baptism Sunday. Remember last Sunday or the Sunday before Christmas? Our usual Sunday routine is well and truly upset. You can't even get your regular seat. And the church is full of people who don't know how to behave., walking out in the middle of a prayer, taking photos, mobile phones going off.

Two perspectives on baptism, but I wonder if they are not caricatures. In the first those outside the church at least recognise the importance of marking the birth of a child in some

sort of spiritual way. They just need encouragement and direction. And in the second, the faithful are in the main pleased that the church is at least full on Baptismal Sundays.

But baptism is much more than recognising the importance of a baby's birth. And it's much more than than having an overflowing church. On this Sunday, when we celebrate and remember the baptism of Jesus, I'd like to look at how powerful a sacrament baptism is.

When, in my early twenties, I had at last mustered the courage to tell my grandmother in Scotland that I had changed religions and turned from being a Catholic to being a Protestant, amongst other things, she sent me this. .... It's a baptismal certificate. A certificate that indicated that I was baptised at St. Joseph's church in Burntisland on 30/5/48. In my grandmother's mind, she was reminding me of who I was and where she thought I belonged. A baptised "catholic" child of God. She saw the power in being baptised, albeit in a very limited fashion.

**-3-**

For baptism does give us identity, At Jesus' baptism we read, "You are my Son, the beloved, with you I'm well pleased." Jesus is given confirmation of who he is - that he is loved, that he is valued, and with that powerful assurance, so begins his public ministry. It is as if such affirmation was necessary for him to commence his road to Calvary. And so it is when we baptise our children. Baptism for them is a way of parents letting their children know who they are. That they are beloved of God. That God is well pleased with them. And in baptism, there is power for them to be able to face anything that might lie ahead of them. The only problem is that when the baptism becomes merely an occasion for a family get-together, people forget and the power of baptism is not harnessed.

Baptism is about being joined to a family much wider than our own. That's why we baptise in the context of a worshipping community. That's why in one such worshipping community I have heard of, they get the oldest church member to come and lay hands on the newly baptised child, a powerful sign of the transmission of the faith heritage in that church, from the oldest member to the youngest. Perhaps it's something we could try here in a effort to show how significant baptism is in the life of our community.

And baptism is also a call to discipleship. In the early centuries of Christianity, being baptised was not a straightforward thing. As an adult, you needed to be prepared. You spent months and in some cases years preparing yourself for baptism, for becoming a disciple of Christ. Baptism was a clear demonstration that you were a Christian in a hostile world.

**-4-**

Today, children are still baptised, but to be called a Christian is hardly worth noting. Few if any of us would call ourselves disciples of Christ, yet if we are baptised that is what we are. In baptising our children we are saying that we intend to raise them as disciples of Christ. More than ever there is a need for the church to ensure that those we baptise know what it is to be a disciple of Christ, otherwise there is little or no point in baptising. If we are to continue to baptise the numbers of children that we have in recent months, then it is incumbent upon us to take seriously our promise that the children have the opportunity to

become true disciples of Christ. The provision of children's ministry, youth leaders, crèche carers, therefore become crucial to us in exercising our baptismal ministry.

Finally, baptism is not just a cute ceremony and that's that. We believe that as with Jesus, the Holy Spirit is present ready to guide us as we seek to live the life of Christ. In a real sense we are commissioned as baptised people to undertake the work of Christ. Commissioned for ministry. Is that what it means to you, to be baptised? Does being baptised comfort us when we are wont to put ourselves down? Does our baptism remind us that we are disciples of Christ, baptised into the ministry of Christ? Perhaps if we begin to take our own baptisms seriously, then we will see the opportunities we at Pilgrim have in ministering not just to those who want to join us in church but to the whole of Launceston. In baptism we are empowered by the Spirit - so let take our own baptisms seriously.

John also said that Jesus' baptism was more than a baptism of water, with the coming of the Holy Spirit it was a baptism of fire. So as we think of our own baptism of fire and water let us pray:

-5-

**O Lord, John the Baptist promised that you would bring fire  
and it is with fire that we ask you to come.  
Come with fire to enliven our weakened spirits and our dimmed hopes.  
Come with fire to light the path to your truth.  
Come with fire to burn away all in our world and in us  
that stands in the way of your Word.  
Come with fire to warm hearts grown cold  
and to comfort those against whom the stormy winds have blown.  
Come with fire to draw us into the holiness of your life,  
to empower us with your Spirit and to send us with zeal into the world you love.  
We ask this in the name of your beloved Son, Jesus Christ our Lord. AMEN.**

*Rev Tony Duncan  
10<sup>th</sup> January 2010  
pilgrim.tony@tassie.net.au*