

SEASONS OF THE SPIRIT

March 12th 2003

BAPTISM

Choir

Gaelic Blessing

Rutter

‘Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit-just as you were called to one hope, when you were called-one Lord, one faith, one baptism; one God and father of all, who is over all and through all in all. But to each one of us grace has been given as Christ apportioned.

Ephesians 4: 3-7

“There is one Lord, one faith, one baptism,” So wrote the Apostle Paul. But what is this one baptism in which all must share? If you went out into Fleet Street, and asked passers by whether they have been baptised, and what it meant to them, these are some of the answers you might get:

The first person is somewhat surprised at the question and a bit vague about his answer:

‘Yes, I’m almost sure I have been baptised-that is, if it’s the same as christening? My mother told me once that she had had me “done” along with the diphtheria jabs when I was a few months old. I don’t remember, personally! What does it mean to me? Well. It means I’m church of England – A Christian? Of course. Do I go to church? Well, Christmas and Harvest, you know.’

The second man we meet turns out to be a practising Catholic.

‘I most certainly have been baptised,’ he replies. ‘It took place when I was about a month old, and it means a great deal to me. For it was baptism which brought me into the Christian church. All I do now as a Christian, all I am, springs from that baptism into the church long ago.’

And the next person is a member of the Baptist church.

‘Yes, I have been baptised, by immersion. It was three and a half years ago. I had lived a fairly wild life, but had recently been brought to a living faith in Christ, and my pastor showed me that I should be baptised now that I was a believer. He took me through the Acts of the Apostles, and I saw the point. So I got baptised, and it was marvellous. I can still vividly recall going down into the water, letting it all close over me as if to mark the death and burial of my old life, and then the start of

a new life with Christ as I burst out from under the water. It was my public witness to having come to Christian faith.'

Three people, three quite distinct views of baptism. For the occasional worshipper it is a formal event that happened when he was very young and means he can call himself C of E. For the Catholic it marks his identity and continuity with the people of God across the world and down the ages. For the Baptist it marks his repentance and faith, his adult response to what God in Christ has done for him.

So what are the constituent elements of this sacrament which embodies both God's love poured out upon us before we either desire or deserve it, and the response of faith, as we commit ourselves to become a disciple of Christ, his soldier and servant to the end of our lives?

Choir

What a wonderful world

Weiss/Theile arr RJ

The first element is Thanksgiving – the acknowledgement that every new baby is a gift from God, a tiny miracle upon which we ask God's blessing at the very beginning of their earthly journey through life: and also the acknowledgement that before I can do anything for God, God has done something wonderful for me – in creating me in love and redeeming me by the Cross of Christ.

The Lamb

William Blake

Little Lamb who made thee?
Dost thou know who made thee?
Gave thee life and bid thee feed
By the stream and o'er the mead;
Gave thee clothing of delight,
Softest clothing woolly bright;
Gave thee such a tender voice,
Making all the vales rejoice.
Little Lamb who made thee?
Dost thou know who made thee?

Little Lamb I'll tell thee,
Little Lamb I'll tell thee:
He is called by thy name,
For he calls himself a lamb.
He is meek and he is mild;
He became a little child.
I a child and thou a lamb,
We are called by his name.
Little Lamb God bless thee.
Little Lamb God bless thee.

The second element is washing. Jesus himself went down into the River Jordan to be baptised, because water symbolises cleansing, renewing, the giving of a fresh start and a new beginning, as we become incorporated into Christ's Body, the Church, and allow His Spirit to work within us. This is how Justin, in the 2nd Century, describes the ceremony of baptism:

I will explain how we also dedicated ourselves to God when we were made new through Christ; lest, if we omit this, we seem to be in any way unfair in our explanation. As many as are persuaded and believe that the things are true which are taught by us and said to be true, and undertake to be able to live accordingly, are instructed to pray and to entreat God with fasting, for the remission of their past sins, and we pray and fast with them. Then they are brought by us where there is water, and are born again in the same manner in which we were ourselves born again. For in the name of God, the Father and Lord of the universe, and of our Saviour Jesus Christ, and of the Holy Spirit, they then receive the washing with water.

Apology 1: 61

Choir

Wash me thoroughly

S.S.Wesley

The third element is Death and Resurrection, the dying to sin and being reborn to new life in Christ that is the central characteristic of the Christian life:

Don't you know that all of us who were baptised into Christ Jesus were baptised into his death? 'We were therefore buried with him through baptism into death in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, we too may live a new life.

If we have been united with him in his death, we will certainly also be united with him in his resurrection. For we know that our old self was crucified with him so that the body of sin might be rendered powerless, that we should no longer be slaves to sin-because anyone who has died has been freed from sin.

Now if we died with Christ, we believe that we will also live with him. For we know that since Christ was raised from the dead, he cannot die again: death no longer has mastery over him. The death he died, he died to sin once for all; but the life he lives, he lives to God.

