

Easter 6, 2012

Easter is still with us. Two more weeks to go! And Easter is the season for baptisms. Don't worry, we don't have one today! But again and again in the readings both for Sundays and for the weekdays of Eastertide we are reminded of the centrality of baptism, this rite of passage, the entry-point on the Christian journey. One of the things that always intrigues me as we work through the different ways baptism is narrated in the New Testament, and reflect on the way the Church has chosen to administer the sacrament over the centuries, is the question of timing. If baptism is a "rite of initiation", which is how liturgists and theologians often describe it, then at what point in the faith journey ought it to be administered? And how is the effect different if it's done at a different point?

Here are the two most basic options:

First, baptism as an adult, after a period, sometimes a long period, of study and careful preparation, where the candidate can say with a degree of certainty of commitment and belief "I turn to Christ; I repent of my sins" and so on, and understand the creed to which they are signing up. This was absolutely the practice in the early church from the second century on, with catechumens often excluded from being present at the Eucharist, or even any service of the Church, until they had been fully instructed prior to baptism. Baptism was thus a literal "entry point", and belief, carefully defined, was the precondition. Confirmation arose from the need to have exactly this sort of preparation and public articulation of faith for those who had been baptized as infants. In the Anglican tradition, it has been historically common to associate confirmation with first communion, and in a sense this is a continuity with the ancient practice of excluding catechumens from the Eucharistic parts of the service, and only allowing them in once they have made their public profession of faith.

Which brings us to the second option: baptism undertaken at the very beginning, as a first encounter with Christ. Thus the baptism of infants, whose Godparents agree to raise them in the Christian faith. Here it is the grace of the sacrament, rather than the belief of the baptized, which is said to be most crucial. Faith and belief will come through being raised in the Christian community. At least that's the theory. There is no suggestion that a baby can be a committed fully believing Christian, and there is no suggestion that the validity of their baptism is in any way conditional upon later faith. But baptism is not withheld. And it's not just infants to whom this theology of baptism may apply. Just as the infant

cannot say with comprehension “I turn to Christ”, so some adults will answer the questions and undergo baptism at a very early and tentative part of their Christian journey, with the church trusting that the Spirit, through the sacrament, will work in the life of the newly baptized to bring them to the fullness of faith. Thus, in Acts chapter eight, the Ethiopian eunuch is baptized by Philip after only one short conversation in which there is no actual suggestion of a conversion having taken place. Having had the words of Isaiah explained to him he simply says “look, here is water, is there anything to prevent me being baptized?” Philip agrees, and they do it, with the eunuch going on his way rejoicing while Philip is spirited away. We are not told what happens to the eunuch. We are not told that his faith grows strong. We are merely told that baptism is not to be withheld from one who asks for it, even after the briefest and strangest of first encounters.

Today’s reading from Acts chapter ten gives us a third option: baptism being administered as a rite of community admission to a group of people from outside the Church who have already received the Holy Spirit. It’s almost a rite of reception rather than initiation.

Baptism is not for them a point of first contact. It is the affirmation of a work that has already taken place. They have heard Peter preach, and perhaps not for the first time, most likely they are not yet fully schooled in the person, work and teachings of Jesus. They are “outsiders”, gentiles who are not members of the Church. Yet the Holy Spirit has been poured out on them, just as upon the apostles at Pentecost. Baptism is suggested by Peter as an affirmation of the Spirit at work in them, not as an invocation for that Spirit to descend. Just as the Ethiopian eunuch asked the question “what is to prevent me from being baptized?” so now Peter asks “Can anyone withhold the water for baptizing these people who have received the Holy Spirit just as we have?” This story follows on from Peter’s vision in the house of Cornelius, where God shows him that all things have been made clean, and immediately precedes his report to the Council of Jerusalem at which he repeats that story and the officialdom of the community finally agrees that gentiles may indeed be Christians. The fact that the Holy Spirit has descended on this group of gentiles both forces and reinforces the point. Baptism is not just for those who are “like us”. Baptism is for everyone who genuinely seeks it, and God sometimes chooses the unexpected.

There are consequences for the church in all this. For baptism in this story is a rite of reception and welcome as well as of initiation. It is not just the point at which the new believers say “yes” to Christ and to the

Church, but the point at which the church says “Yes” and “welcome” to them. The church is changed as much as – in fact sometimes even more than – the newly baptized. With every new addition the body of Christ grows, and growth means change. In this case the change is dramatic: a Jewish Church is opened up to the Gentiles. This is a momentous change, and the Church today could not exist without it. Sometimes the change is much more subtle. The point is that there is no room in the Church for dispositional conservatism. And thus we must constantly ask: is the church open to the work of the Spirit? Do we, actively or passively, exclude anyone? How do we ensure that those upon whom the Spirit of God has already descended are allowed both to join us and to change us? How can we recognize all of that when it happens, and how do we change how we do things when we recognize that we have failed in our duty of hospitality?

The Church, as it baptizes and teaches new Christians, must be prepared itself to grow and change with each new member of the body of Christ. What will that change be? Who can ever tell? But we must be open to it; open to the Spirit of God at work in us, and in the world, in new and unexpected ways.

- CD'A.