

The 2nd of Epiphany – John 1:29-42

I would like to begin by asking you a question about our church. What do you believe is the most important feature?

I will give you some options, just to make it easier. And I want you to be honest.

Hands up if you think one of the most important features is our kitchen.

Hands up if you think it is our chairs and pews.

Hands up if you think it is our beautiful building and grounds with all its splendid architecture.

Hands up if you feel it is our Pulpit, Lectern, Altars and Font.

Well, it is difficult to choose between them, as each has a special part to play in our church's life. Our kitchen is a sign of our hospitality. Our pews, seating and furniture help us interact together as community and offer us the privilege of being able to sit together in comfort. Our buildings and grounds can themselves be inspirational in helping our spiritual focus and of course provide us with a practical place in which to meet and worship. And we would have to say that our Pulpit, Lectern, Altars and Font are centrally important features too. Here's why.

Our Pulpit and Lectern is a symbol of our common call to learning and proclamation, It shows that we take seriously our need to learn more about God – week by week – learning how we can properly be the Body of Christ.

Our Altars show that every week we follow our Lord's command to share bread and wine in a reliving re-membrance of him, and joining billions of Christians all over the world in the breaking of bread each week. Praying that we may become what we eat – holy gifts from God.

Our Font has an important place in our life together. It signifies that God loves us, that we are his children; that God cares. Baptism marks the beginning of the Christian journey and through our baptisms we are united to both Jesus in his baptism and billions of other Christians past, present and future. Through our baptism God enfolds us with his grace and we become members of Christ's body, the Church. Our baptism is the beginning of the journey and we are called to go out and spread the Good News of Jesus.

This all begins 2000 years ago in a Middle Eastern wilderness on the banks of the river Jordan. John the Baptist is the Prophet who has been preparing God's people for the one whom God will send to transform the world¹.

John had been fasting and living a simple life so that his whole focus could remain on God – far removed from the distractions of the city. It is not easy to live alone in the wilderness – far more comfort and pleasure is to be found in the cities and towns. There, the fast pace of life means the agonising questions of who we really are and our need of God, can be avoided, denied or ridiculed.

Not for John. First he has to face up to who he truly is and amend his own lifestyle, then he calls the rest of the human race to a change of life too – so that they may be ready to meet God at the opportune time.

Many Jews looked forward to the coming Messiah, they believed the new age would come with God's purifying judgment. Many knew God would find humanity wanting.

An earlier prophet, Ezekiel, had given an evocative glimpse at God's intentions: 'I will sprinkle clean water upon you, and you shall be clean

¹ Luke 3:1-19

from all your uncleanness'.² John the Baptist, it seems, had begun to fulfil that prophecy. The new age is about to dawn - come and be washed, come and repent, come and be forgiven - prepare your hearts and amend your lives for the coming of God.

To tell the Jews that they were dirty and needed washing was radically provocative. They thought it was the Gentiles who were the dirty ones; tax collectors and sinners were dirty; but not the people of Temple and Law – they were surely clean.

Not so, says John, as if he knew that people's free forgiveness would only be found in one person, Jesus Christ. That in Jesus they would be able to see and touch God. 'Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sins of the world', John says.³ This is strong stuff indeed.

But John's baptism was only a preparation; it was concerned solely with cleansing and forgiveness. It was preparing people to be worthy of meeting God in the person of Jesus. John's baptism then is a pointing forward. A calling towards a new way of life.

But John's baptism is not Christian baptism. Jesus' baptism broadens the concept and Christian baptism develops into something much more.

Jesus has no need for a baptism of repentance, for he is without sin. Yet he is one of us and he ministers to us. He is baptised so as to identify himself with us in our sinfulness and our need. But something additional happens at Jesus' baptism. As Jesus prays, the Holy Spirit descends on him like a dove and God's voice proclaims Jesus' divine Sonship: 'This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased'.

² 2 Ezekiel 36:25

³ John 1:29

And so Jesus' baptism sees the forgiveness of sins, the gift of the Spirit and the bestowing of a dignity as a beloved Son of God. These all come to us through our own Christian baptism. We are washed, we are filled with the Spirit, and God says to each of us - you also are my beloved son, you also are my beloved daughter. And that's wonderful enough; that's all the good news we need. We are his sons and daughters – adopted by him because of our relationship with his Son. God loves us. We are safe!

The New Testament tells us that in our baptisms we are brought from darkness into light. Christ clothes us, surrounds us, inhabits us. Christ's life becomes our life and the Spirit works within us from that day to help us continue to walk in that light. As beloved sons and daughters of God, the Spirit moves within us, encouraging us to work at cementing his life within our own. But it takes effort. As with any relationship worth its salt, we must make the sacrifices necessary to build the bond.

The Kingdom of God is here in the person of Jesus Christ and it lives in each of us on account of our baptism. The old age of death, greed and corruption must die to make way for the Kingdom of righteousness and joy. A Kingdom where the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed and poor have good news brought to them. A kingdom where we are all safe!

The problem is the old age of corruption and evil runs parallel to God's new age of life, love and light. Our baptism provokes us daily to live as those who belong to the new age of light. But as the days and months pass, that radical call of our baptism can get lost and it is all too easy to settle down into complacency.

Which is why I want to return to the Font. Nearly all of you walk past the Font every Sunday. The blessed water of baptism remains in the font all

year round. I would encourage you to make your weekly walk into church a more deliberate act – touch the water with your finger. Make your entry into church a part of your regular spirituality. Let it remind you that you walk in newness of life and how fortunate you are to have been called by God. That you have been given the Spirit of holiness. Let it reassure you that the words of God once declared to Jesus himself at the river Jordan are true for you too: 'You are my beloved son, you are my beloved daughter'. You are safe!

Let it inspire you to work for the Kingdom in prayer and actions. And let it be a sign, a reminder, a celebration, that in Christ the old corrupt age is passing away - the new age has dawned - and you were enlisted and commissioned at your baptism to be active agents of it; until the Kingdom of God comes in fullness and joy.

Amen.