

Advent 2 2025

Matthew 3.1-12

I baptise you with water for repentance [...] he will baptise you with the Holy Spirit and fire.

Advent Sunday this year falling on a fifth Sunday of the month, we gathered together as a Benefice for the Advent Carol service at St Catherine's; consequently, I offered no homily on the first Sunday of the Church's year, which feels most unusual indeed.

But thanks be to God, as it means that we get to start this year's preaching at the beginning, which is to say, at baptism.

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We have recently had a baptism in this Benefice, and as all our baptisms are now held at our principal Sunday services, you will—if you have been paying attention—be *au fait* with the theology of baptism, and my particular fondness for St Paul's theology of baptism as, quite literally, a kind of death and resurrection into new life. What we have here, in this morning's text, is something that really does seem

quite different; and, in a way, it is. Or rather, there is a real question here about the relationship between the baptism offered by John the Baptist and that offered by the earliest disciples of Jesus, after his death, resurrection, and ascension.

That there are two baptisms is clear from what John is saying. First, a baptism by John, with water, for repentance; and second, a baptism by Jesus, with the Holy Spirit and fire, for reasons unspecified in the text. And a *politics* of there being two baptisms—if not quite a theology—persists for a while into the apostolic era, as we see it played out in the Book of Acts.

There, Paul encounters twelve men, who had been baptised by John. What happens next is a little bit difficult to work out. The most straightforward reading is that they were baptised again, this time “in the name of Jesus”. Re-baptism is nowadays rare in the Christian world, though not unheard of. Some (though not all) Baptists, and the inheritors of their theology of *believers’ baptism* will baptise adults, even if they have once upon a time been splashed thrice with water over a font in a church.

But it is also possible that these disciples of John whom Paul met were not baptised *with water* again; it is possible, for example, that the second baptism just involved Paul laying his hands on them,

which the text describes him doing, whereupon “the Holy Spirit came upon them”. It is hard to say for sure.

Regardless of the material details of the ritual, however, it is clear what what St Paul is doing—and what John the Baptist is talking about—is not a denial of the validity or efficacy of the first of the two baptisms. John could hardly have been accusing himself of performing an empty ritual. Nor does St Paul say that the disciples need to be rebaptised because the first one didn’t count. And so, they are doing something quite different from modern day Baptists and Pentecostals.

In both cases—John and Paul—the effect of the second baptism is additive to the first. Christians need to repent, and the ritual of repentance is baptism with water; but they also need to receive the Holy Spirit, the ritual for which is underspecified, though the laying on of hands is clearly a part of it. And, fire is conspicuously missing, presumably for health-and-safety reasons.

In any case, it did not take long for the two baptisms—whatever they looked like—to become one. From the earliest days, Christian baptism imitated John’s baptism in the use of water. There were surviving disciples of John going around baptising people in his footsteps; and actually there are still

some of them around—they're called Mandaeans, and mostly lived in Iraq before the US invasion in 2003, and are now more dispersed, with many in Sweden and Australia of all places. But they were never very numerous, and soon into the apostolic age, Christian baptism was basically the only one in town. It became an alternative to John's baptism: and, to the minds of Christians, a new and revised, updated and improved version thereof. Eventually, we would even enshrine the singularity of baptism into our Creeds: "one baptism the remission of sins", as we recite on Sunday mornings.

But now, the one baptism with water has to fulfil two functions: the one about repentance and the one about the Holy Spirit. We are very familiar with the first; but much hazier about the second. There is something peculiar about this, in a way that almost concedes a point to the Baptists who insist on adult baptism. It is odd that we, who baptise infants, seem totally comfortable with the idea that baptism is for repentance or the remission of sins. After all, even armed with a robust doctrine of original sin, we would surely admit that adults have racked up more sinfulness than children, and so are more needful of ritual cleansing.

Which brings me back to St Paul's theology of baptism. Baptism, you have heard me say repeatedly, is a kind of death: in the font, the candidate of baptism is drowned. Not figuratively, but *literally*—although, of course, it doesn't look like it, any more than a thin wafer and thimble of fortified wine chemically resembles flesh and blood; any more than the ragtag bunch of sinners we call The Church resembles the Body of Christ. All the same, the Church is the Body of Christ; the consecrated elements *are* his flesh and blood; and baptism is a drowning, much more than it is a bath. The Greek word *baptizó* implies as much. It was used to refer to shipwrecks: vessels plummeting, their passengers with them.

But to speak of baptism as death tells only half the story. The other half is about resurrection and new life. The candidate is not only plunged into the water, but re-emerges, a new creation. And that is, I suppose, enough, rhetorically. Not for John the Baptist, though, whose language of the Holy Spirit and of fire is much neglected in our theologies of baptism. Both speak of life.

Across many languages, Greek and English being no exceptions, words for "spirit" usually have, in their etymological background, words for breath. The Greek *pneuma* means breath, air, or wind; and forms

the root of the word *pneumatic*, for example, as in tyres. The English *spirit*, from Latin, *spiritus*, itself from *spirare*, means breath; we have retained this in our word *respiration*, literally, to breath again, that is to say, repeatedly. And, in our Creed, the Holy Spirit is the Giver of Life; a reference to the Spirit hovering over the abyss before creation, and to God breathing life into Adam.

And fire has always been thought to be important for life, sometimes even as itself living. Heraclitus supposed that the soul is made partly of fire, and that fire was the universal cause of change. It has been, in the Western philosophical tradition, associated with many aspects of biological and psychological life, from digestion to passion. Indeed, biologists still now think of metabolism as a form of combustion.

So it is that what is received in baptism is not just the death and end of the old order of things and way of being, but life itself, vitality itself. Baptism is more than a drowning, but also a wind under our wings, to carry us out into the world for Christ's sake; also a fire in our belly, voracious in its appetite to touch and transform everything it encounters.

How important, at the beginning of Advent—the beginning of the Christian year—to remember our

baptism, and to remember that it is not a fact about our past, but a driving force for our future.