

## **Proper 18**

### **Sixteenth Sunday after Pentecost**

#### **Matthew 3:13-17**

It's lovely to have christenings two Sundays in a row, isn't it? Or should that be 'baptisms' two Sundays in a row? What is the difference between 'christening' and 'baptism'? I've been asked that question a lot over the years. The answer is very simple. They both refer to the same thing. In the same way that a couple are married during a wedding ceremony, so a person is christened during a baptismal ceremony.

The word christening is most often used of infants while baptism is the general term for all. And the subject of baptism always raises a smile for me because this matter was likely to be a major focus of attention when I was transferring from ministry with the Baptist Union of Scotland to the Church of Scotland ministry. Of course, the Baptists will only baptise individuals who profess faith in Jesus Christ, but the Church of Scotland, along with the majority of churches in the Reformed tradition, permits the baptism of infants also. And when I was preparing for interview before the Ministries

Council's assessment panel I very carefully prepared my response to the anticipated question; "can you in good conscience baptise infants?" As it so happened the issue was barely touched on at interview and I was a wee bit disappointed because I was so well prepared to answer in detail. I remember a Church of Scotland minister, and a former Baptist minister himself, telling me that in the good old days when he was transferring, he had to stand at the bar of the General Assembly and answer questions from Commissioners on his

theology of baptism. I was spared that kind of trial.

So what's it all about? I suspect that many folks are a wee bit uncertain about what it means and so it's good this morning to spend some time reflecting on aspects of it and I hope that there isn't too much overlap with what we looked at last Sunday.

The act of baptism is an important step in life. It can be administered only once and it cannot be undone. I have heard in recent times of people appealing to church authorities for their names to be removed

from Cradle Rolls and Baptismal Registers but all to no avail because once an individual has been baptised that event has occurred and it cannot be undone. It is an historical event. But, of course, it is so much more. In Matthew's Gospel, we read that Jesus Himself came to His cousin John to be baptised. He then went on to establish baptism as a sacrament in the church, calling believers to follow in His footsteps. Baptism was a big thing in Jesus' day and it remains a big thing today.

Most western Christians take baptism for granted, but for many in the world the act

requires immense courage. In countries like Nepal it once meant imprisonment. For former Soviet or Chinese or Eastern bloc believers in the past, it was like signing their own death warrant. There was no room for appeal; it just happened. Because the stakes are so high, coming to faith and receiving baptism is not taken lightly. There are not many converts to Christianity; but those that do convert are powerful witnesses to the love of Christ. There is no comfort-zone Christianity in these circumstances; instead there is obedience and sacrifice. But what does it all mean?

What is baptism about? Well, first and foremost baptism is the action of God. It is God moving to the individual with his love and care. It is not primarily about you and me and what we feel. Therefore it is not primarily about our faith or lack of it. That's where we would take issue with our Baptist friends who would always describe baptism as a believer's response to the love of God. It should be the other way round. It is God's action and God's affirmation of every individual carefully created and dearly loved. Now, that's not to say that faith has nothing to do with it. Far from it: promises are

always made, whether from the individual being baptised or on behalf of the individual who cannot speak for themselves yet. And so, as a wedding ring is an outward sign that a person is married and a military uniform is an outward sign that a person is involved in that particular branch of service, then similarly, baptism is a symbol designed by God to identify a person as belonging to Jesus Christ. However, I use the word "symbol" here with caution. To say that it is "just a symbol" takes away from the depth and beauty of baptism. Baptism is a symbol, but it is so much more than that. It is a mark



of God's spirit on a life; a chrism, an anointing, a sacrament, a mystery in which Lordship over a person's life is declared. Baptism is an outward representation of inward realities. In Biblical symbolism, water represents inner cleansing (Ephesians 5:26, Hebrews 10:22,) and spiritual rebirth (John 3:5,) both of which are central themes of baptism. Baptism is also, in essence, like a funeral. It is an act of faith in which we testify, both to God and to the world, that the person we were before is dead and buried, and we are now raised as a new creation in Christ. This is beautifully

illustrated by the Romans' passage; "Therefore we are buried with him by baptism into death: that as Christ was raised up from the dead by the glory of the Father, even so we also should walk in newness of life." Baptism is a very special way of God communicating His love to us. When we receive God's saving grace, it is no accident that He calls us to identify with Him in a way that makes it real to us. It is important that the person you once were is given a proper burial! Baptism is a very powerful reminder of God's wonderful grace. The person we

were before is dead forever, and we are raised with Jesus as a totally new creation.