

Baptism

Isaiah 49:1-7; John 1:29-42

The poet Philip Larkin wrote:

“If I were called on

To construct a religion

I should make use of water.”

Nearly all religions make use of water. The Book of Genesis links the origins of humanity with the springing up of water. Our emergence from dry dust is linked to the flowing of water. Jesus began His ministry by emerging from the water of the Jordan. Water was such a powerful image that Early Christians thought that all water was blessed.

At the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church USA two years ago, as you entered the hall in Portland, Oregon, commissioners were greeted by a huge glass font filled with water. It is an echo of the medieval tradition of placing fonts at the entrances of church naves to remind people as they entered that they were baptised.

Water’s use in the Bible and in the world is never far from sacramental. Water gives life. When there is no rain, the land is dry, the crops die, and people are made hungry. How many days can anyone live without water?

Water is not a straightforward image for life. Too much or too little can be devastating. Water can give life and take away life. It is likely that water will gain even more importance in the years to come. In a recent environmental appeal the Archbishop of Cape Town asked for the developed world to change its lifestyle in order that the water of the world might be shared better. Although 75% of the earth’s surface is covered by water, less than 1% is usable by humans – soon it is feared we will compete for less water. Wars in the past have been fought over land and oil; in the future it may well be water.

Whatever water touches, it refreshes and brings to life. It is a powerful image. Many ancient churches across Britain were built near the site of water, either streams and rivers, or ancient wells. Perhaps a nod towards pre-Christian times when water was seen as sacred. It is no surprise that the Christian faith tradition sees water as sacred too. Water, from the Holy Place, brings life. The message of God, when shared from Holy Places, brings life.

There is no record of Jesus baptising anyone during His ministry, but the gospels attest to the fact that Jesus was baptised by John. Two years ago I visited the River Jordan. On one side, the Israel-Palestine side, the site is still covered in land mines, left there from the 1967 war. The Halo Trust, a charity that specialises in working in countries where landmines have been deployed in war, begun the difficult process of demining, with backing from Israeli and Palestinian authorities, as well as Christian Churches.

On the Jordanian side of the river, the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan has already completed the work and the baptismal site is a place of pilgrimage. Careful excavation has uncovered 2nd, 3rd and 4th century churches. You can touch the stones of the buildings; you can walk down into the ancient baptisteries where the Jordan was once channelled. The place resonates with holiness; it is one of God's special places where water, the cleanser, the life-giver, is all around. It flows over the earth, but you can hear it in the air as you walk.

It is by water, the Sea of Tiberias, or Galilee, that one of the resurrection appearances occurs. The River Jordan flows through that sea. It brings life, new life, and it is no surprise that Jesus, the water of life, appears there to His followers.

In baptism the symbolism of water is not simply about cleansing, it is about inclusion. Martin Luther, feeling discouraged on one occasion, reminded himself: "I am baptised, and through my baptism God, Who cannot lie, has bound Himself in covenant with me."ⁱ Through the living water the followers of Jesus encountered their life-giving Lord, and there we find new beginning.

Water is a powerful word of life. Water in baptism is a powerful symbol of God's Spirit washing over us, reminding us of God's love and God's new beginnings. Christianity will flourish in the C21st if we grasp that the Church is above all the community of the baptised.

Baptism may seem like an unremarkable event, in essence in most Christian traditions it is the splash of a little water, and the uttering of a few words.ⁱⁱ But it is the wet symbol of God's grace and welcome. If water is a word of life, might it be that we are to live as God's wet Christians, drenched in God's grace and love, and not as desiccated fossils drained of human kindness and joy and welcome and wonder?

The water of life.

The water of resurrection.

In our dry and arid world, shrivelled by suspicion and bigotry far too often; a world that we are told harbours a hostile environment to many different people because of their race, their creed, their gender, their sexuality, their class, their economic value, what might the water of life achieve? What might the water of resurrection transform where it touches?

At baptism, that lovely ceremony in the Church where children and adults are welcomed into the family of faith, I've taken to filling the font with hot water, so that the steam rises upwards like prayers to heaven, and the water is pleasantly warm by the time the child to be baptised is brought forward. I didn't get to where I am today by not knowing that splashing a child with cold water is a sure-fire way of making them cry, so use warm water instead and more often than not they'll respond with a smile as the splash of water touches them, along with the splash of words that is the baptismal service.

A splash of words that refresh and cleanse, and make us ready for work. The phrase, 'splash of words' comes from the Louis McNeice poem, "Entirely". 'Splash of words' is a good description of faith. When the words of faith splash into your life, the words disturb your surface and have an impact. Ripples of meaning head out towards your shore, and lap against the consciousness of your soul. These words shift your perceptions, slowly but relentlessly, like water drip, drip, dripping

on the impervious areas of life. Your life, like a hillside, is carved, and shaped, and formed by the water of faith until you yourself are re-formed.ⁱⁱⁱ

Like water, faith goes stagnant if it does not move.

In most Christian tradition the colour white is associated with baptism. In the pulpit fall we use on a baptismal Sunday (we have one coming up in March), and sometimes in the clothes that an infant will wear, that's why baptismal robes are usually white, they symbol of purity. For the first Christians their white baptismal garments proclaimed they now shared Christ's purity and hope and were His sisters and brothers.

In some places in the world where people of different ages are baptized they parade around dressed in their white for a week after their baptism at Easter. It was known as 'shining week'.^{iv} I like that! The people who have been baptized are God's shining people. If you are baptized, when did you last shine? Most of us barely twinkle, but God, through the gift of baptism, which is a symbol of God's love, invites us to shine! And if you have not been baptized yet, maybe it is time. The exuberant pop star Lady Gaga said that she was going to change the world, 'sequin by sequin'! I how much sparkle a church full of baptized people might add to God's world.

On this day, this Holy Day, may the water of life, the water of resurrection, the water of baptism, flow around you and over you, beneath you and above you; that you, feeling it's touch, may live, and be God's shining people.

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit

Amen

ⁱ Martin Luther, 'The Holy and Blessed Sacrament of Baptism', Luther's Works vol 35

ⁱⁱ Radcliffe, p1

ⁱⁱⁱ paraphrased from Mark Oakley, The Splash of Words, p xv

^{iv} Radcliffe, p203