

Come and See 2025

Week 2: The Waters of Cleansing

Once, long ago, I worked for the local parks department. One day I was given the task of moving an immense pile of manure. I was entrusted with a small truck and a fork and taken to a stable yard. I had to shovel the manure into the truck, drive it to the park and spread the manure on the rose beds. It was pouring with rain. There was a swirling wind in the stable yard which blew the straw back into my face. I remember ending the day covered from head to toe. I had to travel home on a crowded bus. I was cold. I was soaked to my skin. I stank.

But oh, the hot bath at the end of the day. I ran the water in the tub, stripped off the damp smelly clothes, stepped into the bath and washed away the muck. The best possible feeling. Being washed and clean, warm and dry and putting on fresh clothes. Hold that picture in your mind. This is what it means to be baptised – only the washing is on the inside not just the outside.

All of us will know that feeling. Many of us will know what it feels like to bathe our own children after a day playing in the mud or the sand, with grazed knees or caked on dirt. Soap and water work miracles.

Our exploration of the wonder of baptism begins here with the most basic symbolism of being washed. At the beginning of every baptism service the congregation gather around the font and the minister says: here we are washed by the Holy Spirit and made clean.

The people made of dust and clay are first washed and made new in baptism. Ordinary people made of dust of the ground come to the waters to be made clean again. The dipping or sprinkling with water is the outward sign of the powerful inner cleansing and healing which happens through repentance and faith. There is a deep, deep longing in all of us for that inner forgiveness and cleansing: to be restored and reset; to begin again.

The power of baptism is of course not in itself. Baptism has been given to us by God. Baptism is the outward physical sign of an inner spiritual reality. Jesus Christ offered his life for the sins of the world, so that every one of us might have this new beginning, so we can be washed inwardly and our sins can be forgiven. That deep inner washing happens as we come to the cross, as we repent of our sins and as we place our faith and trust in Jesus Christ. This forgiveness is God's gift to us. We can do nothing to earn God's grace or love.

In the baptism service as we have seen, the candidates turn away from sin and turn to Christ. This is a powerful moment of new beginning. Then, gathered round the font, the candidates with the whole congregation make a solemn declaration of faith in answer to three questions:

Do you believe and trust in God the Father?

Do you believe and trust in his Son Jesus Christ?

Do you believe and trust in the Holy Spirit?

Then the candidates stand next to the font. If they are to be baptised by immersion, they will stand in the baptismal pool with the minister. The minister either immerses them completely in the waters or pours water over them, calling them by name, with these words:

*I baptise you in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.
Amen.*

Often the whole congregation will applaud and cheer as the candidates come out of the water. A baptism is always a moment of great joy and celebration for the whole people of God.

Christians have been baptised of course since the time of Jesus. The gospels tell us that a man named John appeared in the desert by the Jordan to prepare the way for Jesus. He was simply called John the Baptist: he came to call men and women to repentance, to turn from their sins and turn back to God. As a sign of that repentance, he invited them to be baptised in the River Jordan.

Jesus came to be baptised by John. Jesus' baptism marks the beginning of his public ministry. Mark tells us:

In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptised by John in the Jordan. And just as he was coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on him. And a voice came from heaven, "You are my Son, the beloved; with you I am well pleased" (Mark 1.9-11).

The Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit are together in this moment. After Jesus baptism John the Baptist declares to all the world: Here is the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world. We use John's words still in every service of Holy Communion.

Jesus and his disciples continue John's practice of baptism for those who would join this new community around Jesus. According to John 3 both groups were baptising in different places (John 3.22). After Jesus is raised from the dead, he gives the disciples a solemn commission according to Matthew. That commission includes continuing this practice of baptism:

Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And remember I am with you always to the end of the age (Matthew 28.19-20).

In the Acts of the Apostles the disciples continue this practice of baptism – and how. Three thousand are baptised on the Day of Pentecost (Acts 2.41) and five thousand after the healing of the lame man at the Beautiful Gate. Acts tells the stories of the baptisms of individuals and whole households: an Ethiopian eunuch; Saul, the persecutor of the church, Cornelius the Roman centurion; Lydia, a trader in purple cloth and an unnamed jailer in Philippi.

In the early years of the Church, it was normal to be baptised as an adult, often following a long period of preparation lasting several years. In a time of sporadic persecution, new Christians needed to learn the faith. Baptisms normally happened on Easter Eve. The season of Lent began as 40 days preparation for baptism kept first by the candidates and then by the whole church as a time when we remember our baptism and return to our first love of Jesus.

Baptism is the moment when we are washed and made new and joined to Christ and to the Church. This moment of washing is closely linked to the idea of our souls being mended and healed.

One of the beautiful stories which prefigures baptism in the Old Testament is the story of Naaman, a foreign general from Damascus who suffers from leprosy. Naaman travels to meet the prophet Elisha with great pomp and ceremony bringing many gifts. Elisha will take no gifts but gives Naaman a simple command to bathe seven times in the river Jordan which at first he is too proud to fulfil. His servant persuades Naaman. He immerses himself seven times in waters of the Jordan and his flesh was *'restored like the flesh of a young boy and he was clean'* (2 Kings 5.14).

In the story of the Philippian jailer there is a beautiful double washing and healing. *'At the same hour of the night the jailer took them and washed their wounds; then he and his entire family were baptised without delay'* (Acts 16.33). Paul and Silas are washed and healed outwardly. The jailer and his family are washed and healed inwardly.

In a baptism service, the candidates will often be anointed with the beautiful, sweet-smelling oil of chrism, a sign of God's grace and a sign of joy and healing. Then after the baptism, in the ancient rites, the candidates will be dressed in new white robes, symbolising the putting on of Christ, a new nature and a call to live a life of holiness and love. Colossians speaks so powerfully in beautiful language of these new clothes:

As God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness and patience...

Above all clothe yourselves with love which binds everything together in perfect harmony (Colossians 3.12, 14).

Baptism is a wonderful gift to whole households and to adults journeying into faith. The people made from dust and earth are washed, forgiven, cleansed and

healed. You may not have been baptised. Let me encourage you to seek this baptism and new beginning and find healing, rest and peace. You may have been baptised many years ago. Let me encourage you to come to the font again at Easter and renew your baptismal promises and recover your first love.

But there is deeper symbolism still in the waters of baptism. We are invited as people of earth and dust to come and to be washed. But we are also invited to pass through the waters from slavery to freedom, from the desert to the promised land, from death to life.

Come and see.