

# Come and See 2025

## Week 3: The Waters of Salvation

Above the Great West Door of Westminster Abbey stand ten statues first unveiled in 1998. Each of the ten statues commemorates one of the Christian martyrs: someone who gave their life for their faith. But these are not the distant martyrs of the first century or the third century. These are ten martyrs of the twentieth century, drawn from every continent and culture. Dr Martin Luther King is there from the United States. Esther John from Pakistan. Wang Zhiming a Chinese pastor. Janani Luwum from Uganda. Dietrich Bonhoeffer from Germany.

These ten stand as representatives of the many thousands of Christians down all the ages who have given their lives for their faith. Bonhoeffer was a Lutheran Pastor who helped form the German Confessing Church to resist Nazi ideology. He was imprisoned by the Nazis and then met his death by hanging in 1945 just a few days before the end of the war.

Bonhoeffer writes this in one of his best-known books, the Cost of Discipleship:

*When Christ calls a man, he bids him come and die. It may be a death like that of the first disciples who had to leave home and work to follow him, or it may be a death like Luther's who had to leave the monastery and go out into the world, but it is the same death every time – death in Jesus Christ, the death of the old man at his call (The Cost of Discipleship, 99)*

In baptism women and men made of dust and clay come to be washed and made clean, to have our sins forgiven. But there is a still deeper symbolism to the waters of baptism. When Christ calls a man or woman, he bids us come and die. Every baptism, every font, reminds us of that invitation to lay down our lives, the call to our old self to die and to rise again with Christ.

Water is a sign of many things in the Bible. To the people of the Old Testament water is a symbol, perhaps most of all, of the forces of chaos and death. We take a rather romantic view of the seas in Britain and of messing about in boats. But for ancient people the sea was terrifying and it became a symbol for forces beyond their control.

At the beginning of Genesis God creates the heavens and the earth out of the chaos of the flood waters. In the early chapters of Genesis God sends the great flood as a punishment for the wickedness of humankind. Only Noah and his family, eight souls in all, are spared and live. The early Christians see Noah's Ark and being saved from the waters as an early symbol of baptism (1 Peter 3.20-21). Next time you go into a church look up. The rooves of many churches are designed to look like the timbers of a boat – an echo of the Ark and a reference to our baptism.

Many of the Psalms cry out to God from the midst of the waters of chaos, a symbol for danger and for death:

*“Do not let the flood sweep over me or the deep swallow me up or the Pit close its mouth over me” (Psalm 69.15).*

The story of the prophet Jonah is the story of a man who ran away from God and was cast into the sea. Jonah sinks in the waves and is wonderfully rescued by a great fish. He cries to God from the belly of the fish and God restores him to life –

a sign of the death and resurrection of Jesus according to the gospels and another sign of baptism.

But it is the story of the Exodus from Egypt which offers the most powerful image. The Israelites are slaves in Egypt for many generations, bound to harsh taskmasters. Moses leads the people out from slavery. The Egyptians follow in pursuit. The tribes are trapped between the Egyptian army and the Red Sea. Moses stretches out his staff over the waters and the sea parts. The Israelites pass safely through the waters on dry ground to freedom. The Egyptian army pursues them and perishes.

All of this rich symbolism is caught in the beautiful prayer over the water in every service of baptism:

*Over water the Holy Spirit moved in the beginning of creation.*

*Through water you led the children of Israel to freedom in the Promised Land*

*In water your Son Jesus received the baptism of John and was anointed by the Holy Spirit as the Messiah, the Christ, to lead us from the death of sin to newness of life.*

The prayer goes on to speak of death and resurrection as part of the symbolism of baptism:

*We thank you, Father, for the water of baptism.*

*In it we are buried with Christ in his death*

*By it we share in his resurrection.*

*Through it we are reborn by the Holy Spirit.*

*Therefore in joyful obedience to your Son we baptise into his fellowship those who come to him in faith.*

This language of death and resurrection is core to the New Testament understanding of baptism. It's easier to understand if we picture a baptism by full immersion in a river or a pool. The old man or woman in us goes down into the water and dies. There is a radical rebirth, a new beginning. The new person rises with Christ from the waters. This is Paul in Romans 6:

*Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? Therefore we have been buried by baptism into death, so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life (Romans 6.3-4).*

What does this say about our human condition? That we are made of earth and saved by grace but we have so gone astray and become so corrupted by sin that we need the most radical of new beginnings: a new birth, creation.

These are the words of Jesus to Nicodemus referring once again to baptism:

*Very truly I tell you, no-one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above... no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and the Spirit (John 3.3,5).*

Paul writes again in Galatians:

*I have been crucified with Christ and it is no longer I who live but it is Christ who lives in me (Galatians 2.19b-20)*

There is a dying to self in every baptism and a rising to new life. This new life begins now and with it comes the assurance of life in all its fulness and life into eternity with Jesus.

All of us will spend the whole of our Christian lives realising more fully what this symbolism in our baptism really means. Charles Wesley in one of the greatest of his hymns reaches for the language of freedom from slavery, echoing the Exodus and the story of Paul and Silas in jail in Philippi:

*Long my imprisoned spirit lay, fast bound in sin and nature's night  
Thine eye diffused a quickening ray. I woke, the dungeon flamed with light;  
My chains fell off, my heart was free; I rose, went forth and followed Thee.*

Wesley and St Paul in Galatians take us on a step further. We are made of earth and clay. We come to be washed. We come to die to ourselves, to surrender our lives to God in response to God's grace. But how then shall we live? To what shall we dedicate our lives?

It is one of the deepest paradoxes of human life that we find our fulfilment not in seeking more for ourselves but in learning to live for others; not in seeking to preserve our life but in laying down that life for God and for others.

As Bonhoeffer has said, when Christ calls a man or woman he bids us come and die. Because in this great lifelong act of love and service, and only here, is there

the sense of rest and peace and fulfilment and surrender which gives our lives their greatest purpose and meaning. Christ has offered his life for us on the cross. We offer our lives daily to God in prayer and worship and in the ways we live.

As Bonhoeffer has said, there are a number of ways that baptised Christians are called to die to themselves. The disciples were called to leave their homes and occupations. We are sometimes called to difficult, challenging or uncongenial work and service in daily life and through the church. Sometimes there is a call to suffering and even to death as the martyrs testify. Each of us must find our own calling and vocation.

There is a paradox to living a fulfilled human life. Everyone who tries to save and keep their own life will lose it, says Jesus. Everyone who lays down their life for others, who dies to self, who gives themselves away, will keep it and find the deepest joy and fulfilment we can know. This dying to self is not once and for all. It's a daily commitment to costly discipleship which lives out our baptism every day of our lives.

In baptism we celebrate and we mark people of dust being transformed by water and the spirit. We celebrate and we mark our old selves going down into the waters of death and rising again to new life.

But there is much more still to explore in the promise of living water, new life in Jesus Christ.

Come and see.