

'Any Questions' Sermon Series

Week 2: Re Baptism: are babies really born sinful? What is the significance of water in the Bible?



Readings: Psalm 1; John 13: 1 - 10

We have had so many questions for our sermon series that to-day I'm attempting to respond to two of those questions at once: one specifically about baptism, the other about the significance of water in the Bible. Ambitious! but of course, there are connections.

WATER OF LIFE...

I wonder what you would say are the most important things in life? In purely practical terms, I guess WATER has to be up in the top four, along with air, food and shelter. Without it, no life is possible: no physical life, that is. This is the picture we have in the psalm: of a tree planted by the waterside. Its roots need to be able to reach down into the river and draw up water so that it can grow, flourish and produce fruit; without water it will sooner or later wither and die. We know from so many heart-breaking pictures that many of the world's humanitarian crises, in Africa in particular, are due to lack of water: crops fail, people starve, aid agencies come to the rescue: OXFAM, TEAR Fund - Water Aid.

... IN EVERY SENSE

This much is obvious: but if we look at what this psalm is really describing, it is not talking so much about people's physical survival, but about how to live a godly life: about people's spiritual wellbeing and flourishing. Much of the land in the Bible was hot, dry, arid: water was a vital and precious commodity. And often in the Bible water is used as a picture of God's blessing and spiritual refreshing,

and to be thirsty is a picture of our need for God. So what kind of water do we need to quench our spiritual thirst? Jesus says something quite amazing: 'If anyone is thirsty, let him come to ME and drink': he doesn't offer us a book of rules to follow, or a list of things to believe: he simply says 'Come to me and drink'. If we think back to the picture of the tree, then if we are rooted in Jesus, like a tree by a river, then it follows that we will grow to be like him; we are drawing in his living water, which is a picture of the Holy Spirit, and we will therefore produce the fruit of his Spirit: love, joy, peace...

And baptism is a bit like planting a child (or adult) beside THIS river, the river of Jesus, the river of the grace of God, and encouraging them to drink from it. This is not the end of the story, of course because, as they become capable of making their own choices, each must decide whether that is where they wish to stay.

CLEANING UP OUR ACT

The other main way in which water is significant, in the Bible and in our lives, is of course washing. In the Old Testament, a lot of the Jewish ceremonial system involved washing, especially for the priests: you had to be ritually clean in order to approach a holy God.

The idea of washing also forms part of the baptism service; but this then raises the question 'Why would a baby need to be washed? Why, in days gone by, would people rush to have a baby baptised quickly in case they died? Surely they're not born sinful?'

Sometimes people go back to the verse in another psalm of David where he says 'in sin did my mother conceive me': what's that all about? But this is NOT to say either that he was conceived out of wedlock, or that sex is in some way sinful, or that the baby is already guilty of having done something terrible. What it does mean, though, is that God has paid us the compliment of allowing us to make choices:

this is what it means to be human, not some kind of computer animation. And once we get to the age of making our own decisions, we are all bound to make some bad ones: we will fail, fall, flounder, be greedy, selfish, ungenerous. It's part of our human nature, that we're born with. But in baptism we are saying we don't want to be like that, that we want to go God's way, that we want to 'die', as it were, to that old nature and accept God's gift of new life.

Sometimes in a baptism service we don't just sprinkle water on the one to be baptised but immerse them completely - as would have probably been common practice for those joining the Jewish faith in Jesus' day. This perhaps gives a clearer sense of 'drowning out' the old life, the old nature, and rising to a new life.

SAVED THROUGH WATER ?

Though it's quite a complicated connection, it's significant that on more than one occasion in the Bible people are saved, as it were, 'through water' - for instance, Noah and his family are carried to safety in the ark through the flood waters, and the people of Israel escape from Egypt when God enables them to cross the sea which then drowns their pursuers.

In the gospel story where Jesus washes the disciples' feet, it's interesting that he says to Peter that once he's been washed thoroughly, he will only need his feet to be washed. In other words, once a person's old nature has been symbolically washed away in baptism, whether by sprinkling or immersion, it doesn't mean they will never get anything wrong ever again: if only! No, there's nothing 'magic' about the water. Of course, we will all still fall short and trip up, time and

again, but we can now simply come to Jesus each time, confess what we've said, thought or done that's

not been good and know that he will forgive us and wash the slate clean again. 'Baptism isn't magic', someone has said: 'it points back to the saving grace of God in Jesus, and forward to a life of obedient faith.'

WOULD YOU LIKE A DRINK?

In Biblical times, one of the key strategies of an attacking army was to cut off the enemy's water supply; it was a sure way of winning, even if no shot was fired. In Jerusalem, you can still see the remains of a water tunnel they managed to construct to thwart this enemy tactic and save the city. In the same way, we need tactics in place to ensure our spiritual water supply; to ensure we are rooted in Jesus and drinking his living water day by day. If you like, it's the spiritual equivalent of Oreal face cream - the only way to make sure we don't wrinkle up, wither and decay!

This is why in a baptism service we remind parents and god-parents of their responsibility to encourage the child's faith; or if it is an adult being baptised, to read the Bible, pray and meet with other Christians in order to develop that 'life of obedient faith', that is, to build a closer relationship with Jesus as Lord and Saviour, friend and brother.

It's the only way to have real stability, real rootedness, and to see real fruitfulness in our lives. We know that without

food and water we will die. In this country, we are blessed to have easy access not just to physical but also spiritual food and water: Bibles, music, other Christians, for example. But knowing they are there, 'just in case', won't help us grow: if we don't 'eat and drink', our spiritual life will wither and die. So let's help ourselves!

