

Baptism

St. Brandon's

Acts 11:1-18; Rev. 21:1-6; John 13:31-35

19th May 2019

There is a certain poignancy to today's baptism. For me, there is a personal poignancy because James was one of the first members of the Youth Club when we resurrected it back in 2000. So, aside from reminding me how old I am (and, indeed, how old James is!), it's satisfying, 19 years later, to now be involved in the baptism of James' and Cat's first child. But there's a deeper poignancy in that baptism is partly to do with death as well as new life, and for the Morgan family of course, new life and death came too close together. So while grandson and grandfather met each other, Sue and James and Cat, and I'm sure many others of us here today, will feel that John's untimely death robbed him and Paul of time together, and what would have been, I'm sure, a mutually rewarding grandfather / grandson relationship. We feel John's absence very closely today.

So, with that as an important part of the background for today, let me try to say something about baptism itself. And I want to start by wondering what kind of conversations you had this morning before you arrived here? And I would guess there were some questions about whether other members of the family had slept well; inquiries into what you'd like for breakfast; some nervous looking at watches and maybe some 'Hurry up now, or we'll be late' kind of statements. Perhaps also a question as to whether you looked OK in that particular outfit, the answer to which is almost always 'Yes dear'! Such are the mundane kinds of conversations we tend to have. My wife Alison surprised me recently when her first words as she opened her eyes one morning were, 'Did Chelsea get through?', referring of course to the Europa League semi-final! For someone who has displayed almost no interest in or knowledge of football throughout our married life, where did that come from?! But such are the mundane concerns of much of our lives.

Now contrast that with some of the words we've heard in Church already this morning. We were greeted with 'In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit' – probably not something you said to each other over the breakfast table this morning! In our first reading, Peter was praying, and in a trance saw a vision of a sheet coming down from heaven, and then heard a voice from heaven. Then he tells his audience that the (Holy) Spirit told him to go with the men who had just arrived. And when he arrives in the house he's told that the man there had seen an angel, and that as Peter began to speak the Holy Spirit fell upon them, and they were baptized with the Holy Spirit.

And you'd be forgiven for thinking ... What? What on earth is going on here? How does that all relate to ordinary life, as we experience, to conversations about breakfast and football, if at all?

And then our second reading spoke of a new heaven and a new earth, of God making His home among mortals, and that when that happens death will be no more, mourning and crying and pain will be no more.

And again, you'd be forgiven for thinking ... What? What's this all about? And how does it relate to our common but mundane experiences which include, as we've already acknowledged this morning, death, mourning, crying and pain?

And then in our Gospel reading Jesus talks about being glorified Himself and God being glorified in Him. How does that relate to toast and marmalade?

So with all that, you'd be forgiven for thinking that the moment you stepped into Church this morning, you crossed into a kind of parallel universe. How does all of this in here relate to anything that goes on in the 'real' world that we all came from this morning out there?

And I'd want to say (but then you'd expect that I would!) that these passages and other words from our service do two things. First, they point us to another level of reality, in a sense above and beyond the everyday mundane reality that we experience. They say there is a God, who is mysteriously Father and Son and Holy Spirit, and that level of reality exists whether we want to acknowledge it or not. But second, they say that this parallel level of reality doesn't exist entirely separately from our level of reality. They interrelate. The home of God is already among mortals. George Herbert, a priest and poet, coined the phrase 'heaven in ordinary'¹ to try to express this interrelationship between the heavenly and earthly realms. God reaches from heaven into the ordinary everyday experiences of our lives.

So how does all that then relate to Paul's baptism this morning? And you'll probably not be surprised when I say that the same kind of thing is going on in baptism as I've just described goes on in the rest of life. Here is Paul, a very special baby, indeed when you think about it, a miracle. But not that special in that all babies are miracles. So in that sense, just an ordinary baby, just one more member of the human race, joining the other 7.7bn of us on the planet, and with a number of orifices that are currently somewhat out of control. There's nothing particularly special or different about Paul. It's all rather mundane. He too will learn to pass the marmalade over the breakfast table.

But baptism draws attention to this whole other parallel universe of God, and says that it doesn't just exist independently, out there, not touching Paul in his daily life, but that right now, indeed ever since and even before he was born, the parallel reality of God has been reaching out to Paul. And in that sense, he is very special. And today, in his baptism, we acknowledge this reality of God in Paul's life, and we pray that it may become ever more real for him as he grows up. So Paul will be baptised in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. We will pray that God, who will today receive him by baptism into his Church, will pour upon him the riches of His grace, and that he might daily be renewed by God's Spirit, and come to the inheritance of the saints in glory. We will ask God to cleanse Paul in the water of life and that, filled with the Holy Spirit, he might know that he is loved as a child of God, and that he is safe in Christ for ever.

We will, in other words, invite heaven, invite God into the ordinary of Paul's life now and for ever, sure that God will fulfil his side of the deal, and praying that Paul will, throughout his life, be able to respond as a child of God baptised in the Holy Spirit. That's the combined reality of today.

Amen

¹ Prayer (1) – see <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/44371/prayer-i>