

immersion!
a sermon preached on the
baptism of christ

12 January 2014

at

st john's
ANGLICAN CHURCH CAMBERWELL
by fr david moore, vicar

the lections: Isaiah 42:1-9, Acts 10:34-43, Matthew 3:13-17

Louis Williams designed this church building with a baptistery in the south transept. It was, after all, the 1950s – the work which ecumenists, liturgists and theologians had been engaged in for several decades, even by then, had not yet come to wider attention. The church was still in the era of so-called ‘private baptisms’ – a spiritually regressive practice which many regarded as ‘traditional’, but which in fact was new-fangled. I imagine that the font was later re-located to its position adjacent to the lectern in an attempt to reconnect baptism and eucharist.

I was delighted when I heard that you had already planned to re-locate the font again – this time to the location which most closely matches the early church’s initial practice, more clearly representing baptism’s symbol as rite of entry into the Body of Christ. It was a joy to enter this church building on that September evening via the waters of my rebirth. It’s of tremendous spiritual significance that every time we enter into this place we may touch the waters of our rebirth – and mark ourselves again with the sign which was made on us at our baptism. Each time, we touch the waters of birth and death – of dying and rising. Each and every entry into this place an outward and visible sign of the inner and invisible reality of the Paschal Mystery.

Such developments are never complete, of course. One consequence of these developments is that the south transept is now something of a lost space - a space with confused decorations and without a clear purpose. More crucially, the font itself remains an artefact of an era when baptism had become very polite, thoroughly tame, institutionally-focussed. I invite you to take a long, meditative look at our font – do you get a sense of drowning, of dying in its depths?

The earliest Christian fonts – found in large private houses converted into liturgical space in an era when Christians were regarded with suspicion – were indeed large enough to drown in. Three steps down – into a body of water deep enough to be immersed in. The priest, standing waist-deep in the water, pushing the candidate’s head under water three times – dying, in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. The candidate finally emerging from the ordeal of a death – taking three ecstatic steps up into the new life!

It’s quite a challenge recovering the potency of baptism in Christendom-shaped church buildings, such as ours, in which baptism was not so much a rite of initiation into the death and resurrection of Christ as membership of a well-mannered society, and with bird-bath fonts in which you’d be hard pressed to drown a rat. It *can* be done, and has been done – though not without difficulty, of course. In some churches the font has been completely rebuilt. In other instances the historic font has been integrated into a deep pool of water surrounding it. Either way, running water, deep enough to really get wet – preferably to be immersed in.

Immersion. Drowning. Dying. Descent into the abyss. Baptism is an initiation into the primal forces of the cosmos. As we know from Genesis, everything that is originates in the abyss – the waters of chaos.¹ The Spirit of God breathes over the abyss, creating. Baptism embodies this descent into the primal abyss – for the sake of being re-born into a greater reality.

In our time it has been physicists and cosmologists who have dared to explore the unfathomable mysteries of the primal abyss – to reveal the deepest reaches of time and space. Thanks to them, we now know that everything that is exploded into existence about 13.82 billion years ago – that nothing was before that singularity which physicists like to call the Big Bang. We know that in the initial fractions of a second temperatures were in the billions of degrees – that this molten, infinitely-dense cosmic soup was the font, ultimately, of atoms and elements and

¹ Genesis 1

everything. We know that had the conditions in that initial fraction of a second been slightly different, there would be no universe as we know it. We know that the elements of which we are composed emerged out of the colossal supernovae explosions which were its consequence.

Perhaps the even more startling news is that less than 5% of the known universe consists of visible matter – that about 68% of the universe consists of what physicists call ‘dark energy’, a further 27% consisting of ‘dark matter’!² We have so taken for granted that life consists of what can be seen, calculated, purchased, consumed, and locked up with our various security devices – this is truly shocking.

Lesser known, in our time it is has been depth psychologists who have dared to explore the far reaches of the human psyche – to open for us the mystery of consciousness, who have revealed that only about 10% of us is consciousness, the remaining 90% being the unfathomable depths of the unconscious psyche, a psychic equivalent of dark energy and dark matter.

We children of ‘the enlightenment’ have so over-stated the significance of the mind and rationality that all this is quite a shock.

It seems to me that not only have these astounding truths from physics and depth psychology been largely ignored by the market economy – the spiritual and religious institutions also continue to behave as though none of this is known. Perhaps the desire for power and control is the sin to be confessed?

When Jesus approached John the Baptist, the latter immediately recognised who-was-who in the power stakes.³ But Jesus’ refusal to play this game – towards which Matthew gestures by the phrase ‘fulfilling of all righteousness’⁴ – suggests that in this moment he realises, and confesses, what constitutes his greatest temptation, and the greatest threat to his vocation. Instead, Jesus submits to the loss of power, control, even identity. Indeed, he submits to being plunged down into the abyss – in which the elements are dissolved, ego and carefully-crafted persona must die – of which a muddy Jordan is an outward sign.

Immersion. Dissolution. Loss of identity – even life itself – in the abyss, an intensity equivalent to the physicists’ singularity. Baptism is naked immersion into this loss of power – loss of identity, death to ego, collapse of persona – in order to be re-born out of the greater non-rational, non-measurable realities of dark energy and matter and the unconscious.

Jesus being the human archetype, the fully human one, this, then, is the universal human path,⁵ the individual, personal initiation into the Paschal Mystery, the Spirit-breathed epiphany by which we know ourselves as beloved daughters and sons of God.⁶

The church being Christ’s body, its calling is to confess its grasping at power and control, that it may die and be born again out of the abyss of which baptism is the outward and visible sign.

All this is set before us not only on this feast day, but every time we enter this building.

vicar@stjohnscamberwell.org.au

² see <http://science.nasa.gov/astrophysics/focus-areas/what-is-dark-energy/>

³ Matthew 3:14

⁴ Matthew 3:15

⁵ Acts 10:43

⁶ Matthew 3:17