

# *the way of tomb & womb*

a sermon preached on the feast of the feast of the

## *Baptism of our Lord*

10 January 2016

at

### *st john's*

ANGLICAN CHURCH CAMBERWELL

by *fr david moore*, vicar

the lections: Isaiah 43:1-7, Psalm 29, Acts 8:14-17, Luke 3:15-22

“When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you.”<sup>1</sup> “The voice of the Lord is over the waters.”<sup>2</sup> “When Jesus also had been baptised [in the waters]... a voice came from heaven.”<sup>3</sup>

In a week of dramatic floods, when we have witnessed the drowning of two young boys playing at an Adelaide beach, the drowning in a swollen river of the local baker on his way to his Seymour bakery, and the shocking deaths of a father and his two small children in Port Lincoln harbour, we must surely be reflecting on the enormity of water.

As those living on a land of fire, flood and drought, and in this era of searching for water on distant planets and comets, we can hardly fail to notice the preciousness of water.

What would not be apparent on entering most churches, however, is that the Christian symbol of initiation into Christ is actually a life-and-death matter. Fonts having been so domesticated – made mere ornaments, with a volume of water insufficient to drown a rat, and largely ignored – the casual observer would never guess from our font, for instance, that this is a symbol for drowning.

To recover the true enormity and preciousness of the font, we would have to put a great deal more water there, ideally it would be flowing, and it would have to be quite evident that this font speaks *not* of decoration or historical artefact, but of the baptism of Christ.

Which begs the question, what is the baptism of Christ? To understand the baptism of Christ it is necessary to reconnect what the church has been inclined to separate. Namely, Christ's baptism has a double aspect: his baptism in the Jordan; and his baptism in the waters of Sheol, that is, his death and burial. On the cross Christ is plunged into the darkness of death – understood by the early church fathers as baptism in the abyss. In this way Christ completes not only the Exodus, but also the Spirit hovering over the abyss, the void, in the very beginning.<sup>4</sup>

To better understand how Christianity came to the intuition of this double aspect, it's necessary to recover the symbolic origins of water and baptismal rites in the Ancient Near East.

Water is arguably the greatest and most important symbol in human experience. “One of the commonest forms of symbolic activity in the religious history of the [hu]mankind has been that associated in some way with water.”<sup>5</sup> All life emerges from water. Water annihilates. These two aspects of the one reality cannot be separated. Water is the great symbol of the Abyss, the depths, darkness, the void – the unconscious, all that is unknown. In almost every culture there is a symbolic understanding of descent into the waters as a penetration into the deepest and most mysterious of all realities, the Unknown from which all life is derived.

For this reason water is associated with dying, rebirth, regeneration, renewal. And the *source* of water is the great Mother – the *materia mater*, the eternal feminine, the womb of all creation. The precursor of all later symbolic forms, adopted by Christians and others, was the image of “water gushing forth from the great opening which came to be regarded as the earth's vagina.”<sup>6</sup> Such language, is only shocking to a patriarchal Christianity still stuck in the long dark shadow of St Augustine's neurotic revulsion of the flesh.

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<sup>1</sup> Isaiah 43:2

<sup>2</sup> Psalm 29:3

<sup>3</sup> Luke 3:21,22

<sup>4</sup> Genesis 1:2

<sup>5</sup> F W Dillistone, 'Water Symbolism and Christian Baptism', in *Christianity and Symbolism*, London: Collins, 1955, p183.

<sup>6</sup> Dillistone, p185.

That all the patriarchal religious traditions felt the need to take control over feminine fecundity is well attested in the history of religions – and certainly evident in Judaism and Christianity. Feminine fecundity terrifies patriarchy – as countless episodes in the story of the development of monotheistic Israel attests. Reaction to the feminine was violent, destructive – and this deep-seated illness continues to plague humankind, as is all too clear to see. Many have concluded that there runs a direct line through patriarchal religion, all forms of misogyny, the instrumental-materialist abuse of women, children, and the destruction of mother earth herself.<sup>7</sup>

Yet even the most thoroughgoing efforts to control or suppress the feminine cannot ultimately eliminate what is both an ineradicable aspect of life, as well as the essential fount of all creativity, regeneration, and true growth. It is telling that - in spite of the ascendancy of patriarchal power in the church – the word the church took for the name of its initiatory vessel is derived from the ancient Sumerian for ‘mouth’. That is, ‘vulva of the earth’, in Latin *fons*, from which is derived font!<sup>8</sup> Speaking to the baptised, Cyril of Jerusalem (313 – 386) declared: “You have been plunged thrice in the water... and have come forth again. In the water, as during the night, you have seen nothing. In coming forth you have found yourself in the brightness of day. At the same time you *died* you were *born*, and this wholesome water has become for you *both a tomb and a mother*.”<sup>9</sup>

Font as tomb, and mother! This double aspect of the font – and of Christian initiation itself – is what today’s feast and gospel declare to be good news. The voice declares of the one baptised, “You are my Son, the Beloved, with you I am well pleased”<sup>10</sup> This Son-ship requires descent: into the abyss; the darkness; silence; Sheol; tomb.

Jesus’ experience of initiation into what the church calls ‘paschal mystery’ is archetypal: meaning, the way he goes is the  $\alpha\rho\chi\eta$  *archē*, the first, the prototype, for all human persons. Those initiated into Christ – by water and Spirit – must also go the way of tomb and womb.

‘Baptism’ as mere belonging to a religious organisation, then, is thus hardly baptism at all – though it has to be admitted that the church as empire-institution has readily distorted baptism in that way. “Are you able be baptised with the baptism with which I must be baptised?”<sup>11</sup> this is the non-negotiable question of Christian discipleship. Perhaps this is what is meant by John’s prediction that the One coming after him would ‘baptise with Spirit and with fire’?<sup>12</sup>

The double aspect of Christ’s baptism means that the moment the Voice declares him to be the Beloved Son is the same moment he enters the ‘Last Day’, the *eschaton*, the end. The ‘Last Day’ is the symbol of the Divine Future – infinite and impossible to contain or confine – calling us ever forward out of our past, out of the present. The regeneration of life – the renewal of all life – depends on this.

Thus, “in every baptism ... *starting point* and *goal* are *one*. The Last Day began to dawn for each of us on the first day of our life in Christ.”<sup>13</sup> That is the symbolic meaning of the font standing at the entrance to the place where the Eucharistic community gathers to break open the Word and break the Bread: to be recalled to the fact that in our baptism, with Christ, *our origin and our ending are one*. To touch water when we enter here is to recall the Christian evangel: the Last Day began to dawn for us on the day of our baptism. It is also why at a burial the coffin is suspended above the waters of the font (that is, where fonts have been restored to their early church proportions) - ‘When you pass through the waters, I will be with you!’

To live, consciously, from this fontal truth is to live as God’s daughters and sons.

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<sup>7</sup> This very weekend a team of Scientists have announced their findings in the journal ‘Science’, that the earth has moved into a new geological era, the Anthropocene: ‘Humanity’s impact on Earth opens Anthropocene epoch, scientists say’, in *The Age*, 8 January 2016, <http://www.theage.com.au/environment/humanitys-impact-on-earth-opens-anthropocene-epoch-scientists-say-20160107-gm1nwt.html>

<sup>8</sup> Dillistone, p186.

<sup>9</sup> Dillistone, p186. Emphasis added.

<sup>10</sup> Luke 3:22

<sup>11</sup> Mark 10:38.

<sup>12</sup> Luke 3:16

<sup>13</sup> L S Thornton, *The Common Life in the Body of Christ*, cited in F W Dillistone, pp210-211.