

Easter Vigil

A sermon preached by the Revd. Theodore S. Atkinson at St. Christopher's Episcopal Church, Oxford, PA at the Easter Vigil Service, March 29, 1986. Scripture: Romans 6:3

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.

Tonight we recount the story of redemption in Holy Scripture. We read how God saved the world through the waters of the flood, how he rescued Israel through the waters of the Red Sea and how he promised to wash away the filth of the daughters of Zion. We heard how the women came to the tomb and found it empty and how Jesus met them and they held his feet and worshipped him. But I want to focus your attention now on the Epistle lesson, the words of St. Paul, "Are you ignorant that all we who were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death?"

Tonight we witness the sacrament of Holy Baptism. Do we understand ~~what happened? Do we realize that all we who have been baptized into~~ Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? That's something to think about this night when Christ lies in the tomb awaiting Easter morning.

Consider these facts about baptism. Did you know that Jesus never baptized anyone? It's strange but the NT states it as a fact that Jesus didn't baptize. *Here's another fact.* Nobody thought that Jesus ought to be baptized. John the Baptist said to Jesus, "You should be baptizing me." Jesus had to insist that John Baptize him saying, "Suffer it to be so now, for thus it becometh us to fulfil all righteousness." So Jesus was baptized in the river Jordan.

Here's a third fact. Jesus thought of his death as the fulfilment of his baptism. One day James and John, two close disciples of Jesus, asked for chief seats in their Master's coming kingdom. And Jesus refused. He said, "Ye know not what ye ask." But in refusing, Jesus asked if they thought they could be baptized with his baptism. They answered, "Yes",

and Jesus agreed that they could be. But it wasn't until weeks later that they saw what his coming kingdom meant. His kingdom came on Good Friday when Jesus was lifted on his throne on the cross and there at his right and left hand were two thieves. Just think; they had asked for those two places of honor. So they learned what he meant by his baptism. He meant his death.

And then there was another day when Jesus spoke about how his coming was going to set the world on fire. He said, "I came to cast fire on the earth; and what will I, if it is already kindled?" And then he went on to say, "But I have a baptism to be baptized with; and how am I straightened till it be accomplished!" It was another reference to his death.

So, you see, Jesus thought of his death as his baptism. And since Christ died for all the world, that baptism was for all the world. In Christ's death, then, all the world has been baptized. All the world doesn't know that yet. All the world hasn't even heard about it yet. All the world doesn't really care yet. The fact is, though, that Christ in dieing for all the world, was baptized for all the world. And so Jesus didn't baptize one or two people in Galilee and Samaria because the day was coming when he would baptize the whole world outside the walls of Jerusalem when he died on the cross.

So why do we baptize? If all the world has been baptized in Christ's baptism of blood, why do we baptize? And why, especially, do we bring helpless infants to be baptized?

We baptize people in order to incorporate them into the body of Christ's church. We baptize people to bring them officially into that sphere where they are likely to hear of Christ's baptism for us all. We baptize today, and the Church has always baptized because Christ has already baptized

every human soul in his death, and we want to bring people to that faith.

How soon do you start bringing people to a knowledge of Christ and what he's done for us? At the age of 21 when you're old enough to drink? At the age of 18 when you're old enough to vote? Or do you wait until their old enough to believe? Some of us here this evening are parents. How soon can a person begin to know something of the love of Christ? Or put it another way. How soon can a baby begin to assimilate love of any kind? It's never too soon. As soon as the baby is born it rests in the arms of a mother or father and is nursed and cared for; it's drinking in love and being nourished as certainly as its mothers milk nourishes and strengthens. And that's why children are incorporated in the Church in infancy. They too need the love of Christ.

~~Baptism isn't simply a sign. It's not simply a little ritual we go~~
through. In Baptism something happens. God is at work. In Baptism we see Christ taking that little child into his arms and included him or her in his kingdom. Think of a mother's kiss. A kiss is certainly a sign. It's a sign of love. But it's not a bare, empty sign. A kiss does something. A kiss conveys love and evokes love. I read about some babies in India who were rescued because they were unwanted. They were nursed in the most modern and hygienic clinics. But they all died. Studies showed that it was because the nurses didn't fondle them and hold them and kiss them. Signs of love are effective, they aren't merely signs. When, then, the priest prayerfully takes the child in his arms and traces the sign of the cross on the forehead, the sign of Christ's baptism, and pours water on that child's head something happens. God is at work showing that child that he or she is loved and belongs to God.

In a way the church baptizes infants in order to make it possible for

them later to respond to the love of God in Christ. If we don't hold our children and kiss them when they are helpless infants, they won't very likely hug us and kiss us when they grow up. The response of faith is important. We want our children to grow up and love Christ and embrace him. But the response doesn't come first. God's act comes first. Christ's act comes first. Christ didn't wait for all the world to believe in him before he died for them on the cross. While we were yet sinners, Christ died for us. Christ's baptism in blood comes first. Then our response. This is what faith is-- faith is a response. It's saying "Yes" to God's love for us. To help us make that response, we're baptized, we're incorporated into the sphere of God's responding people.

Tonight we've not only baptized we'll soon participate in that second great Sacrament. ~~Baptism is the initial sacrament to be administer only once to incorporate us into his church.~~ Holy Communion is the continuing sacrament of God's love for us, the body broken, the blood outpoured. It's also a sign but more than a sign. It's an effective sign in which God feeds us and strengthens us and assures us of our forgiveness purchased by Christ. It helps us to respond again to that love. In it our lives are renewed and revived. We're buried with Christ by baptism into death: that like as Christ was raised up from the dead by the glory of the Father, even so we also should walk in newness of life. Let us now come to the Lord's Table to be fed on the body and blood of Christ and so be strengthened to walk in newness of life. Amen.

To Jesus Christ, who loves us and has freed us from our sins by his blood and made us a kingdom, priests of his God and Father, to him be glory and dominion for ever and ever. Amen.