

SERMON: 12 January 2020 – Rev Alistair Cowper

“Baptism and Life”

(Isaiah 42:1-9 and Matthew 3:13-17)

So what is the purpose of baptism? Jesus tells us the answer when he goes to the Jordan river and submits himself to be baptised by his cousin John.

Here’s how Eugene Peterson translates it in The Message:

Jesus then appeared, arriving at the Jordan River from Galilee. He wanted John to baptise him. John objected, “I’m the one who needs to be baptised, not *you!*”

But Jesus insisted. “Do it. **God’s work, putting things right all these centuries, is coming together right now in this baptism.**” So John did it. (Matthew 3:13-15 MSG)

There is the answer. The purpose of baptism is that it is **God’s work of putting all things right.**

But as we’ll see shortly, I believe part of that putting things right is tied up with people encountering fullness or wholeness of life.

In the midst of Jesus ministry on earth he announced, I have come to bring life in abundance (John 10:10).

Jesus began this revolutionary movement and God in Christ has continued to put all things right and bring all things together ever since.

It wasn’t long after Pentecost that Peter had a vision from God. In the vision he saw a blanket come down from heaven with every kind of animal, reptile and bird on it. And he heard a voice telling him to go, kill and eat.

But being a good devout Jew Peter was horrified by the thought of eating what he knew to be unclean. But the voice said to him that if God says it’s ok to eat then it’s ok to eat.

It’s as Peter is trying to work out what the encounter means three men, sent by a Roman centurion called Cornelius, knock at the door and the Spirit whispers to Peter to be prepared to go with them and not ask any questions.

That’s faith! Sometimes it’s like saying, I don’t know why I’m doing this but it feels like the right thing to do.

By the time Peter gets to Cornelius' house he's begun to work out what God's Spirit has been saying to him in the vision - that no race is better than any other - and God's putting all things right and bringing all things together would include people of every race, creed or colour.

Here's how The Message translates Peter's speech:

Peter fairly exploded with good news: "It's God's own truth, nothing could be plainer: God plays no favourites! It makes no difference who you are or where you're from—if you want God and are ready to do as he says, the door is open. The Message he sent to the children of Israel—that through Jesus Christ everything is being put together again—well, he's doing it everywhere, among everyone.

(Acts 10:37-38 MSG)

Peter then gets the opportunity to share the good news of the life, death and resurrection of Jesus from Nazareth and how he was anointed by the Holy Spirit and was led by the Spirit in everything he did.

And as soon as Peter's words were out of his mouth, the Holy Spirit came on those who were listening, those outsiders, non-Jews, who were heard then to speak in tongues praising God.

Astonishingly, Peter then says:

"Do I hear any objections to baptising these friends with water? They've received the Holy Spirit exactly as we did."

Hearing no objections, he ordered that they be baptised in the name of Jesus Christ.

(Acts 10:46-8 MSG)

Peter knows now that baptism isn't a secret rite of passage to be kept for the favoured few but a means of celebrating life for all.

I love that story for so many reasons. Maybe mostly because it teaches us that there are no outsiders in the kingdom of God. Everyone is in, and in the process of being included in.

Baptism of the Spirit is for all.

Peter's journey of faith teaches us the importance of listening to God and having the willingness for our understanding to be corrected and shaped by the leading of God's Spirit.

Indeed our lives are best lived in submission to and obedience to the Holy Spirit which is the presence of Christ with us.

I think the Spirit lives in all of us; waiting to be awakened, chosen, received, honoured and drawn upon, so as to become the Living Presence, life in all fullness.

Jesus modelled this perfect reception, submission, obedience, and drawing on the Holy Spirit, and of course his life obedience even led him to his death on a cross.

Although John the baptist is surprised to see Jesus coming to him for baptism, Jesus submits himself to the action, trusting that it is the right thing to do, sensing that it is the thing God wants him to do.

Jesus says, "it must be done, because we must do everything that is right" (Matt 3:15 NLT)

Baptism was for sinners who needed to get their lives cleaned up. Jesus, in submitting to the action of baptism, is associating himself with sinners in need of cleansing. He wasn't too proud to be thought of as one who had sinned.

He took the place of sinners. He was numbered among the transgressors (Isaiah 53:12).

To this extent he didn't care what other people thought of him. He only cared about doing the right thing.

If only world leaders lived like that. Our world would be a safer place. We must pray for the leaders of the nations to turn around and learn from Jesus as we model Jesus' ways in our own lives.

The act of submission before God is a key action associated with the anointing of the Holy Spirit. We've got to want it and be ready to receive it.

As soon as Jesus was baptised, he went up out of the water. At that moment heaven was opened, and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and alighting on him. And a voice from heaven said, 'This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased.'
(Matthew 3:16-17)

Notice that in the Cornelius story, the action of baptism by water occurs after the anointing of the Holy Spirit (as it does elsewhere in Acts, eg. 19:3).

[Cornelius was devout but also submitted/received the good news preached by Peter]

The reformers, like John Knox, thought of baptism as an outward sign of an inward grace. I think they'd agree that it's the anointing presence of the Holy Spirit that is crucial in any form of ministry.

Jesus baptism and anointing preceded his life ministry, his death and resurrection. It was the key driving force behind everything he did and everything he was.

It was the secret to his abundant life and its the secret to ours to.

Because surely that is the aim of baptism - to bring people to discover this abundant life that Jesus came to bring.

The Holy Spirit breathes this life in all fullness.

The Spirit of Christ is leading us to minister/serve/share the good news in ways that brings life, not just to ourselves but to every being.

It's about learning to receive God and enjoy God, together.

Sam Wells writes this week in The Church Times:

“The central purpose of the Church is no longer to reconcile people to God, so that their eternal salvation will no longer be in jeopardy: it is [SLIDE] to invite people to enjoy God just as God enjoys them. God embraces them for their own sake, not for some ulterior purpose: evangelism means inviting people to embrace God likewise.”

He goes on to talk about the importance of our church buildings being places of life - life giving and life celebrating.

[SLIDE - Sheriff Centre, St James' Church]

“church buildings (must be dynamic centres of abundant life. They) should never have come to be seen simply as set-apart places of retreat to facilitate the once-weekly elevation of the soul of the few to the throne of heaven. They must be regarded as places of encounter for the whole neighbourhood, with a mission to be a blessing to anyone and everyone who resides or spends time there.

the priority internally should be as a place that advances abundant life locally, within which liturgical worship should take an honoured but not unduly privileged place. If a local church finds itself in decline, but has lost its vocation to be a blessing to every member of its community, it has only itself to blame.

(he argues that by) making its building available and encouraging its use for cultural and artistic events that foster creativity, expression and beauty, (the church) portray(s) flourishing life.

And it means, in many cases, developing sources of income based on the site which offer employment and generate profit and make the organisation sustainable”.

It's common sense when you think about it. And its got real potential for the church of the future.

The Church of Scotland has rarely treated its buildings with this same degree of freedom and life giving potential. But its time we did. For the sake of the good news and the life of our community.

I know we make quite good use of part of our buildings here but I'm sure there are things we could do differently.

Could our sanctuaries become thriving centres of missional life, not just set apart holy spaces only to be opened one hour a week?

Might they be places where we can live out our baptism in a daily encounter with the Source of love and life?

And who knows, maybe like Peter we'll see an unusual crowd before us, and join him in asking,

“Do I hear any objections to baptising these friends with water? They've received the Holy Spirit exactly as we did.”