



29th April 2019
Acts 8.26-40
John 15.1-8

Transitional Moments

Lord God – our prayer is that the written word will point us to Christ, the Living Word – so in his name we pray and for his voice we listen. Amen.

Last weekend I attended an 80th birthday party in Northampton. We were celebrating with my old Bible Class Leader. A man who did so much to nurture a young faith in me as he, and his wife, showed the love of Jesus to us by the warmth of their welcome, their constant interest in our lives and their generosity of spirit.

There was a beautiful moment last Saturday as we stood in his daughter's garden. Many of his friends from various stages of his life were there – but I was standing alongside two of my contemporaries from 1973, and we were the surprise guests. As the cake was cut Jane asked her father Les to say a few words, so he welcomed everyone and then looked over at us three and said, with tears in his eyes: I just can't believe my old Bible Class is over there. By the end of the afternoon we all had tears in our eyes!

And last Saturday some of us talked about our baptisms – because as a group we'd grown up together and a number of us were baptised at the same evening service on the 24th November 1974.

In my tradition, I'm on the list of Ministers belonging to the Baptist Union, baptism isn't for adults – 'Adult Baptism' is a misnomer, baptism is for believers. It's usually by immersion, that is you go right under but not necessarily so. Some people because of age, disability or maybe even just a phobia of water cannot go completely under – so sprinkling is an option. The amount of water used isn't really the issue.

So I was recalling a service of Believers' Baptism. And we have a baptistry for that here at AFC, and it's right in front of the Communion Table.

Yet, our story as a church community is an ecumenical one. That is, since the church was formed in 1907 we have never been affiliated to just one parent denomination. Alfred Ellis, one of our founders, had a Baptist background so it was perhaps natural that AFC joined the Baptist Union early on. But it also affiliated itself to the Congregational Union which in the 1970's grew into the United Reformed Church. And, as most of you know and rejoice in, we have a heavy informal dose of the Church of Scotland thrown in for good measure. And these other denominations predominantly practice Paedo Baptism, that is the baptism of infants at the font – which at AFC is placed right next to the baptistry, alongside the Communion Table, all set within a band of gold signifying just how importantly we take the two sacraments of Eucharist and Baptism.

One of the reasons infant baptism came about in the early church was because of the persecution of Christians. Whole families were being wiped out and loving parents wanted

their children to receive a sign of God's grace – so they were baptised in the hope that one day they would confirm their vows personally. What was initially just an emergency measure became the Church's norm. And in some ways infant baptism, which is really a wonderful welcome into the family of The Church reflects the idea of Covenant, a central feature found in the faith of our Jewish cousins. It's the idea of belonging and belonging right from birth.

Well here at AFC both members and ministers I think gladly and willingly affirm, respect and rejoice in these two expressions of baptism. We recognise their different emphasises and origins but we see God's grace, God's love and God's action in both traditions.

Of course, baptism in the bible isn't quite as straight forward as we might think.

The Essene Community, a branch of Judaism, had a form of daily self-baptism which was really a sort of prayer of confession with ablutions. A daily ritual of religious washing.

And that sense of being washed from sins is certainly to be found in a New Testament understanding of baptism. Paul also speaks of baptism as dying to self and rising in Christ, of taking off the old and putting on the new.

For the most famous baptiser of them all, John of the Jordan, baptism was all about repentance. Turning around and facing a new direction, one of eagerly looking forward to the coming of the Kingdom of God.

And most of us are perhaps surprised that Jesus was baptised. Maybe his baptism was essentially a moment of dedication to God the Father, an embracing of the Father's will, indeed in many ways that day when Jesus was baptised by his cousin John in the waters of the Jordan signalled the start of his public ministry.

So, what of the lectionary reading today from the Acts of The Apostles – this drama set in the desert with an Ethiopian Civil Servant reading a passage from the prophet Isaiah after worshipping at The Temple and then meeting up with the evangelist Philip – all culminating, apparently, in an oasis baptism.

It's got some intriguing ingredients – but then hasn't everyone's faith story!

Ethiopia today is one of the most 'Christian' countries in the world with 60% of its population expressing some church allegiance.

Did it all start with this baptism? We are not sure. But just maybe what happened that day, although it might have felt relatively personal and unimportant just maybe it has grown into something truly national.

The term eunuch is an ambiguous one here. Sometimes it refers to a person who has been castrated and now lives on the margins of society. If that's the way it's being used in Acts 8 then it's emphasis isn't unique. Philip's concern echoes that of Christ's who regularly sort out those society rejected so he could share with them the all-embracing and inclusive love of God.

But this term was also used simply to describe civil servants generally – I'm not sure how that would go down today in the Home or Foreign Office!

So, here is an officer of the State. An official of the Queen. Yet here is a free thinker, a seeker after truth.

He's worshipped at the temple but it doesn't quite click.

He reads from Isaiah, but it doesn't quite click.

He needs an interpreter. Just as those Emmaus disciples needed to have the scriptures explained, just as Peter expounded who Jesus was after healing the lame man at the temple – so the Ethiopian official needed Philip the Evangelist to draw alongside him. It was as they chatted and teased out faith, as they had this bible study on the go, then it clicked and straight away he asks to be baptised.

In the Baptist tradition you'd normally take at least three or four baptismal classes. We pride ourselves on being biblical – yet the truth is that nearly always in the New Testament immediately after people came to faith they were baptised straight away – their names didn't even come before a Church Meeting!!

I remember a senior minister once saying to me that maybe a more biblical way for Billy Graham to have ended his rallies would have been to ask people to get out of their seats, come to the front and be baptised.

Acts says they found some water in the desert, the chariot screeched to a halt and Philip baptised the Ethiopian there and then.

It's a wonderful moment for this seeker after truth and it just may have been the beginnings of a national Church that today numbers over 50 million people.

But how are we to tie together the two readings Mary read to us just a moment ago?

One about a baptism, the other all about abiding in Christ just as a branch of a vine is grafted into the main trunk in order to bear fruit.

Well, perhaps this is the moment in the sermon when we say that transitional moments – like coming to faith and being baptised have to become consistent moments – like discipleship and faithful pilgrimage.

Now here's a confession for you!

In between my third and fourth year at theological college I began to wonder if maybe I should jump denominations and seek ordination in the Anglican, rather than Baptist, tradition.

I have a number of late night discussions with the principal. He was so helpful and sent me to a friend of his who was Director of Ordinands for the Southwark diocese.

In the end, after some sleepless nights, I stayed put because I really did believe in congregational government as well as Believer's Baptism.

Yet I'll never forget a visit I made to The Tower at Spurgeon's College. For it was in 'The Tower' that one of my favourite lecturers had his office. He was the ethics tutor, but more importantly he was an Anglican.

One lunchtime we had a conversation about baptism. He said: Ian, baptism lasts for a moment, discipleship lasts a lifetime.

So – and this part of the sermon might get me struck off the Baptist Union list! – I've always remembered that conversation – although I really value baptism and baptising people has been a really great privilege, I realise that whether you are baptised as a believer or christened as a baby and confirmed later on – these transitional moments come and go quite quickly. For the Ethiopian Official it almost seems to be over before it's begun and Philip is whisked away.

What really matters is the life of committed discipleship that follows a baptism.

And that's where abiding in the vine, today's second reading comes in.

John 15 is all about staying close to Jesus.

The former Archbishop of Canterbury, Rowan Williams is well known for his scholarly books. He is currently Master of a Cambridge College which is very much his natural environment. Yet one of his recent books, a small book which in reality is a collection of his talks, is entitled *Discipleship* and in the first chapter he talks with such simplicity and authenticity about what he thinks is at the centre of discipleship – he says it's all about 'being with Jesus'. It's as simple and as profound as that. It's about being with Jesus - or as John says in chapter 15, abiding in Christ.

Sometimes the names we give our denominations don't quite give the fullest picture. Baptists actually now have fewer baptisms by immersion of believers than the Church of England. And I suspect that Methodists wouldn't say that being viewed as methodical is their biggest attribute.

Back in the early days of the Church Christians used to be known as members of *The Way* – and I rather like that. It has a sense of being on a journey with a bit of momentum.

And it's about keeping in the way of Jesus, having him as our constant companion as we travel through life – abiding in him.

Last week, standing in a garden on a sunny Saturday whilst attending a friend's 80th birthday I was reminded not only of the baptism of me and my friends, but of the encouraging reality that 44 years on from that night we are all still in the Church, trying to walk the Way with Jesus.

And today in church we have reminded ourselves of both the baptism of the Ethiopian official and Jesus teaching of the Vine and his plea that we seek to stay close to God in our daily walk. Two readings that take us from a transitional moment to a consistent way of life.

May that be our pilgrimage, in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen

Ian Green, Amersham, 27th April 2018