



3 May 2014

**Third Sunday of Easter (Acts 2. 14a, 36-41)**

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‘Now when they heard this, they were cut to the heart and said to Peter and to the other apostles, “Brothers, what should we do?” With these words, the crowd in Jerusalem responded to the first recorded sermon of the Christian church. It’s a response to gladden a preacher’s heart – and Peter, who has so moved his audience with his proclamation of Jesus’ resurrection and exaltation, has his answer ready: ‘Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ so that your sins may be forgiven; and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit’.

Traditionally, over this Easter season, we read the book of the Acts of the Apostles, which presents itself as the earliest history of the Christian community. And in the next few weeks, I thought it might be helpful for us to reflect on what we discover in these readings not so much about the doctrine of resurrection, but about the *practices* that the early church assumed must follow from the proclamation of resurrection. Why *these* practices? What do they signify and how do they help us to live resurrection lives?

So today – we focus on baptism – and I’ll confess at the outset that I find this response of Peter’s, the invitation to this practice, rather an anti-climax in the narrative. Peter has just re-told the story of Jesus to those who were complicit one way or another in his death: ‘You that are Israelites, listen to what I have to say; Jesus of Nazareth, a man attested to you by God with deeds of power, wonders, and signs that God did through him among you, as you yourselves know – this man, handed over to you according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God, you crucified and killed by the hands of those outside the law. But God raised him up,

having freed him from death, because it was impossible for him to be held in its power ... Therefore let the entire house of Israel know with certainty that God has made him both Lord and Messiah, this Jesus whom you crucified.’ (Acts 2.22-24, 36).

Now, if *this* Jesus is the one approved and exalted by God, this Jesus who was condemned as a transgressor, this Jesus who lived a life of mercy and loving acceptance and who has returned to those who judged and rejected him without a trace of accusation or condemnation – if this Jesus is Lord and Messiah, then God is not quite what they had thought. God is not complicit in or served by human violence, but rather unmask it and reveals it for what it is. And so Peter’s preaching is a challenge at the most profound level to the theology of his hearers, as well as to a system of group belonging which depends on there being insiders and outsiders, ‘good’ and ‘bad’, ‘righteous’ and ‘unrighteous’. Rowan Williams has written that ‘when God receives and approves the condemned Jesus and returns him to his judges through the preaching of the Church, he transcends the world of oppressor-oppressed relations to create a new humanity, capable of other kinds of relation – between human beings, and between humanity and the Father’.<sup>1</sup>

It seems that Peter’s hearers glimpsed something of this radical new world, since they were ‘cut to the heart’, realising that they had been caught up in a dynamic that was profoundly ungodly and so inhuman – a communal and spiritual dead end. They are inspired, ready to go, ready for something new and different. And so Peter offers them the first practice of resurrection life. Repent – that is change your minds (*metanoia*), your way of thinking and seeing; undergo a rite of initiation in the name, that is in the way, of Jesus Christ so that you might be released from or forgiven your participation in this ‘dead end’ and empowered with the energy of God’s own life through the gift of the Holy Spirit. In short, be baptized.

Really? That’s it?? As I said earlier, the invitation to this practice can feel anti-climactic – used as we often are to rather conventional and tame baptismal

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<sup>1</sup> Rowan Williams, *Resurrection: Interpreting the Easter Gospel* (Cleveland, OH: The Pilgrim Press, 2002), 9.

ceremonies into a socially acceptable status quo. Yet, more and more, I sense how central, how non-negotiable the dynamic of baptism is if we are to receive and grow into the freedom and power of resurrection life.

The ritual itself, immersion or cleansing by water, is not unique to the Christian tradition. Ceremonies of washing, sprinkling or immersing in water were part of the Jewish preparation for cultic activity and the reception of proselytes, and also of initiation into pagan mysteries. According to scholar Wayne Meeks, however, whereas in these other traditions the water rites were a preparatory purification for worship or for admission to the 'mysteries', the Christian ritual made baptism itself the decisive point of entry into the new community. I'm not sure how much hangs on this, except it means that baptism in the Christian tradition is a once only event – not a continually re-performed cleansing in preparation for some other religious activity. Baptism, as Meeks puts it, becomes a 'permanent threshold'.<sup>2</sup>

And in this context we may understand the early Christian association between baptism and the death of the 'old' self, between baptism and being born into new life. Paul takes for granted this motif – writing to the Romans, he says: 'Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? Therefore we have been buried with him by baptism into death, so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life' (Rom. 6. 3-4). Christian converts were baptised naked, which gave literal expression to the language of 'putting off' or 'dying' to an old humanity and putting on Christ, the new human being, as the candidate was raised from the water.<sup>3</sup> So the symbolism is dramatic and powerful, and signifies not merely a ritual cleansing of the same old self, but the radical transformation of the self, the decisive transition into a new possibility for being.

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<sup>2</sup> Wayne A. Meeks, *The First Urban Christians: The Social World of the Apostle Paul* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1983), 153.

<sup>3</sup> Meeks, *The First Urban Christians*, 151.

But what really does it mean *for us* to recognise baptism as the first practice of resurrection life? We know enough about Christian communities *and* ourselves to know that this symbolic crossing of the threshold into new life through baptism often doesn't look or feel much like the decisive putting on of a new humanity, a new kind of life in community.

Let me say two things about this. First, what baptism as a practice of resurrection life recognises is the necessity for an absolute letting go of the self and the securities we try to hang onto separate from God. People can and do go through the ritual of sacramental baptism, and not be drawn into this dynamic. But you can't avoid this dynamic, you can't refuse 'baptism' in this deeper sense, and truly be changed, truly empowered by the energy of God's own life. That's not because God is mean or is punishing you. It's just because without this decisive letting go of self-sufficiency and self-founding, you are in the way, you are blocking the inrush of the Spirit, you are refusing the trust without which no growth in the life of the Spirit is possible. It's the basic invitation of discipleship: 'follow me', says Jesus, leave your old life behind – no safety net, no probation period, no looking back. Just 'come'. That's the practice of baptism and the only way of embarking into resurrection life.

Yet, and this is the second thing, for most of us, this absolute letting go of the self doesn't actually happen all at once – despite what the ritual suggests. Sometimes it does – and certainly there can be decisive turning points. But mostly, as James Alison says, 'we don't let go easily'<sup>4</sup> but through a long and costly journey of discipleship and transformation. And this is where a practice of meditation is so significant. For this is *how* we make this journey, this is *how* we practise baptism and repentance daily, progressively letting go our self-consciousness, our separation from God, to immerse ourselves in God through the faithful repetition of the mantra. John Main says 'This pilgrimage demands the courage to turn away from self. But there is no discovery, no arrival, unless, in Paul Tillich's phrase, we cross the "frontier of our

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<sup>4</sup> James Alison, *Raising Abel: The Recovery of the Eschatological Imagination* (New York: Crossroad Publishing Company, 1996), 135.

own identity””.<sup>5</sup> Baptism is about ‘crossing the frontier of our own identity’, so to find ourselves alive in Christ, sharers in his mercy, freedom and love. Which means that the invitation that Peter issues, at the end of the first recorded Christian sermon, is more exciting, and much more daring than it first appears.

‘Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ so that your sins may be forgiven; and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit’.

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<sup>5</sup> John Main, *Monastery Without Walls: The Spiritual Letters of John Main*, ed. Laurence Freeman (Norwich: Canterbury Press, 2006), 49.