

16 March 2019

Being in Christ (Ephesians 2: 1-10)

Lent 2

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My paternal grandmother had been brought up a Roman Catholic, but she left the church at some point in the 18-month window between the birth and baptism of my uncle and the birth and non-baptism of my father. By the time I came along, a generation later, and Mum was planning my baptism in the C of E, Grandma's attitude to the whole prospect was apparently cool but pragmatic: 'you may as well get her done – just to be on the safe side'. It's a view of baptism as a kind of inoculation – we'll get her vaccinated for diphtheria, tetanus, whooping cough, and oh – we'd better have a dose of christening too, as a precaution against the wrath to come. It's kind of laughable, but also totally understandable. The church had spent many centuries telling people that if their babies weren't baptised, they risked being excluded from heaven and the hope of salvation. Why wouldn't you take precautions?

Well, tonight we have the joy of baptising Anna, beloved daughter of Lou and Tristan, and I wanted to offer a few thoughts about how *we* might understand what we're doing here, what we're trusting in and praying for her.

Baptism is essentially a rite of transition; it signifies a change in identity. Traditionally, the metaphors invoked to describe this transition suggest that the person baptised is being brought from a state of danger, unfreedom and non-being to a place of security, liberty and belonging. The old baptismal liturgy, for example, retells the story of Noah and his family being saved out of the flood, of the people of Israel led out of slavery through the waters of the Red Sea, and of Jesus coming through the deep waters of death. The baptismal water signifies not just cleansing, but an unmaking of an old death-bound identity and a rising to new life in Christ. St Paul characterises the effect of this transition using metaphors of adoption and

citizenship. We're no longer servants or slaves, but 'children of God'; and where once we were aliens and strangers, now we are citizens and co-heirs. The pattern is of a crossing from death to life, lostness to redemption, enslavement to filiation, alienation to reconciliation.

Needless to say, these metaphors don't come easily to us, and we find highly problematic the idea that the 'natural' or pre-baptismal state of human beings is a state of death and sin from which we need rescue, as our passage from Ephesians depicts it: 'You were dead through the trespasses and sins in which you once lived, following the course of this world' (2: 1-2). So what are we to make of all this? How might we understand what's seeking expression here?

I think it helps to remember that prior to their encounter with Christ, the first disciples weren't thinking of themselves in terms of these metaphors either. They weren't fishing on lake Galilee or wandering around Jerusalem thinking – oh, I'm so enslaved, so lost, so alienated – if only someone would rescue me from this body of death! Not at all – Paul, for example, was quite happy with himself thank you very much. A member of the chosen people, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew born of Hebrews, blameless according to the law and zealous to the point of murder (Philippians 3: 4-6). He thought he was all right Jack, and particularly deserving of God's favour.

But something happens in the disciples' encounter with Jesus that makes them see themselves differently. A new light is shed on things they've taken for granted so that, again in Paul's words, 'whatever gains I had, these I have come to regard as loss because of Christ' (Philippians 3: 7). In Paul's case, he becomes suddenly and powerfully aware of the shadow side of being a zealous law keeper. He recognises how his self-righteousness has led him to be judgemental, excluding and violent. Thinking himself good and doing God's will, he's actually been failing in the great commandment – to love his neighbour as himself (Lev. 19:18). Other disciples begin to recognise their lack of freedom – how, without being consciously aware of it, they're spending much of their energy worrying about public opinion, or about

making a success of themselves. They see how this leads them to compete for status and favour (James and John asking Jesus to seat them at his right and left hands); or to keep their distance from the contagion of those who've self-evidently failed – the prostitutes, lepers, collaborators.

How do they come to see themselves so differently? It's because of the way Jesus is, because of how he relates to anyone and everyone with total freedom. He's not concerned for his own goodness or his standing in the world; he has no honour to defend or shame to cover over. He is simply at home in and with God, lovingly, honestly, fully himself; and so able to relate to others in such a way that their wounds are tended, and healing happens. In his light, those who've been judging and unkind see their mercilessness; those who've been excluded and judged realise they have a place after all. They discover they're loveable and have a contribution to make. Think of stories like Zaccheus the tax collector called down from the sycamore tree when Jesus invites himself over for dinner, and the woman of ill repute whose anointing Jesus accepts.

The kingdom of God is within you, the kingdom of God is among you – Jesus teaches. There is a goodness in each of us, there is a radical human fellowship possible – but so often it's not recognised or allowed expression because we're afraid, or competing with one another, or busy hating ourselves. Jesus enables people to realise they really are created in the image and likeness of God. Thomas Merton writes memorably of the impact of seeing others in this way, 'if only everybody could realize this! But it cannot be explained. There is no way of telling people that they are all walking around shining like the sun'.¹

Yet here's the thing. When we begin to see ourselves and one another this way, it transfigures our whole way of being together. It shifts habits of self-protection and suspicion, habits of judgement and rivalry. It makes it possible for us to regard each other as God regards us – generously, wanting each other's good, desiring each other's fullest life, letting each other be. Hear again the words from

¹ Thomas Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* (Tunbridge Wells: Burns & Oates, 1995), p.157.

Ephesians: 'God, who is rich in mercy, out of the great love with which he loved us even when we were dead in our trespasses (that is, even when we were stuck in rivalry, anxiety, defendedness), [God] made us alive together with Christ – and raised us up with him' (Eph. 2: 4).

The church exists to incarnate this way of seeing one another as God sees us. The church exists to be as Jesus is, 'the body of Christ' and a sacrament of humanity fully realised, fully alive. We stuff up, of course. We fall into self-righteousness and judgementalism; into power struggles and unkindness and the failure to see each other deeply. But again and again, we're called back to the fundamental truth, the extravagant promise of our faith – which is that we are all beloved, we all have a place. We don't have to strive after it; we can't earn it. It's sheer gift: 'by grace you have been saved ..., and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God'. And the more we can relax into this faith and trust this gift, the more we participate in the outflow of its liberating, accepting, transfiguring love for the world.

This is the community, this is the possibility for human being, into which today we baptise and welcome Anna. She is transitioning from an identity she might feel she has to secure by her own efforts – needing the right clothes just to be OK, fearing to fail or competing for place – into an identity that is simply given, and that allows her to be fully and freely who she is created to be. She will learn this identity by seeing others live it out – which is why she is baptised into the body of Christ. By our lives, our freedom and joy, she will discover her new humanity habitable and trustworthy. As she does, she in turn will bear the fruits of freedom and joy, love and contribution to the world. For she is what God has made her, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand to be her way of life. May it be. Amen