

Why Baptism Matters

Psalm 32:1–7; Romans 6:1-11; Mark 1:4-11

Rev Dr Deo Vistar
St Augustine's Anglican Church
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It is a great joy for us today to be able to witness five baptisms here at our church. These five people have each come to a point where they have felt called to make their faith in Jesus Christ public and to identify themselves openly with Christ through baptism. Although the baptisms will take place this morning in our Mandarin congregation, they are something that we, as one church, can all celebrate and give thanks to God for. We may have two congregations, but we are one church family, and the baptism of these five people is a cause for joy and thanksgiving for all of us.

But what is baptism? Why do we observe it, and why is it important?

Baptism, along with the Eucharist or Holy Communion, is one of the two ordinances or sacraments clearly and directly given and commanded to the Church by our Lord to practise and observe. That is why it is important that we observe and practise them, and that is why we do.

The clearest statement of Jesus commanding his followers to practise and observe baptism is found in Matthew 28:18–20, where he says to his followers: “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore, go and make disciples of all nations, *baptising them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit*, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely, I am with you always, to the very end of the age.”

So, there in those verses, it is clear that baptism is a command that Jesus our Lord has given to his followers to observe. And when you reflect on what Christ says, it becomes clear that baptism is an important part of the mission of the Church in making disciples. The mission of making disciples involves baptism. The implication of this is that every follower of Christ should, as part of their discipleship and devotion to Christ, be baptised.

I am very conscious of this vital work that we have as a church. We need and we want to ensure that people who come to our church to follow Christ are taught and encouraged, from God's Word, to be baptised. Hence, in our Mission Action Plan, an important action that we will undertake regularly is to offer and organise a Baptism Preparation Course. It is a course intended for those who have come into the life of Christian discipleship but have not yet been baptised and therefore need to be baptised.

And we have, by God's grace, been deliberate and proactive in acting on that plan. It was only a few months ago, you will remember, that the Mission Action Plan was launched, and with God's help, we have been able to organise and offer a Baptism Preparation Course for our Mandarin congregation. A total of eight people participated in that course, and five out of the eight have

each come to a point where they have felt called and have made the decision to follow the Lord's command by being baptised. So as a whole church we have much to thank God for and much to celebrate today as these five people take this important step of faith.

So it is clear that our Lord Jesus Christ has commanded the Church to practise and observe baptism. But not only did our Lord Jesus give baptism as a command for his followers to practise and observe; he also modelled it by being baptised himself.

The record of our Lord's baptism is given to us in all four Gospels in the New Testament: Matthew 3:13–17, Mark 1:9–11, Luke 3:21–22 and John 1:29–34. The fact that all the Gospel writers chose to highlight and include this event in their record of the life of Christ shows us that it was a significant event in the life and ministry of our Lord Jesus Christ.

This event, of course, the baptism of our Lord, is so important and has such rich implications that several sermons could be preached about it. However, this morning, it is not my intention to preach a whole sermon on it. I will simply make a brief comment about it. And that brief comment is this: our Lord Jesus Christ, because he was, even in his humanity, sinless, did not need to be baptised for his own sake. He had no sin of which he needed to repent or for which he needed forgiveness. There was no sin in him from which he needed to be washed.

John, who baptised him, was fully aware of this, and so he objected to and questioned the idea of baptising Christ. He said to Jesus, "I need to be baptised by you, and do you come to me?" And Jesus said to him: "Let it be so now; it is proper for us to do this to fulfil all righteousness." Then John consented, and he baptised Jesus.

What Jesus meant when he said, "Let it be so now; it is proper for us to do this to fulfil all righteousness," was that his being baptised was right and pleasing in God's sight. And, by stepping into the water and being baptised, he publicly identified himself with sinful and fallen humanity – humanity that needed to be saved and that genuinely needed to be baptised.

It is important to note that the baptism of Jesus marked the beginning of his public ministry. By being baptised, he showed himself to be completely submitted to the Father's will and to the mission for which he came into the world – the mission of saving you and me from sin and death.

Therefore, if you consider the fact that not only did Jesus our Lord command his followers to be baptised and command his disciples to make disciples of all nations by baptising them, but that he also set a perfect example for us by being baptised himself, even though he did not need baptism for his own sake, all of these factors provide a strong and firm answer as to why every believer and disciple of Jesus should be baptised, and why, in our church, we make a big deal of baptism.

What does baptism mean?

Now let's turn and look at what baptism means. A very important word that we need to keep in mind to understand baptism is the word *sacrament*. Baptism is a sacrament. Now, what is a sacrament?

A sacrament is an outward and visible sign of an inward and spiritual grace. God gives us the sign of baptism as a means by which we receive that grace and as a tangible assurance that we do, in fact, receive it.

In baptism, the outward and visible sign is water, in which candidates are baptised “in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.” The inward and spiritual grace that baptism in water points to is death to sin and new birth to righteousness, through union with Christ in his death and resurrection.

We are all born sinners by nature, separated from God. But through God’s grace, through faith in Christ and the gift of the Holy Spirit, we are made members of Christ’s body and adopted as God’s children.

Let’s think a little bit about water. Water, like air, is something so common that we often don’t think about it, and we take it for granted. We take it for granted that in our homes we have clean drinking water, and we take for granted that we do not have a water crisis.

What do we use water for? The most important use of water is for sustaining life. We can’t live without water; animals can’t live without water; plants can’t live without water.

Thus, when we think about baptism and about the meaning of baptism, the first thing we need to remember is that water, which is the main physical element in baptism, symbolises life. The water in baptism therefore points to the gift of life that God offers to us through Christ, which we receive by grace through faith.

Another very important use of water is cleansing and washing. This is also so important that it is hard to imagine ourselves being able to live without the function and use of washing. We use water to wash our bodies. We use water to wash our dishes and our clothes and many other things.

Now, in baptism, the use of water points to the deeper and inner reality of the washing away of sin from our souls, our hearts, our minds and our consciences, through the grace of God and through the saving sacrifice of Christ on the cross. It also points to the deeper reality and work of God in our lives, which is the work of renewal and refreshing. God renews us, he makes us a new creation, and he enables us to be born again by his Spirit.

The water in baptism, because it is physical water, cannot wash away our sins, because our sins are spiritual. What can wash away our sins is the saving sacrifice of Christ on the cross, where he shed his blood for our forgiveness and salvation. And when does that spiritual washing take place? It takes place when a sinner repents of their sin and puts their faith in Christ.

Here in South Australia, because it is such a dry region, and particularly during the hot summer months, water becomes more precious. We become more conscious of the value and preciousness of water. In a way, we are helped not to take water for granted, and to a degree, we can become more thankful for the supply of water that is available for our use. And when the

weather is really hot and dry, you might wish there were an endless supply of water that you could use to water your lawns, plants and trees.

But you know you don't have an endless supply of water. And even when you know there is water you can use, you also know that it is not free of charge, and so you want to use it prudently.

There is so much more, of course, about baptism that is absolutely worthy of our reflection, study and enjoyment. For instance, I haven't expounded on Romans 6, which is a key biblical passage on baptism. And I won't expound it because it is simply beyond the available time that I have this morning.

And so, to wrap up, I am glad for all five individuals who will be baptised today. It is even more special for Guan and me because two of them are our own children.

You might wonder why Guan and I didn't have our children baptised when they were little. The reason is that we wanted them to make their own decision. We wanted them first to have the opportunity to hear the gospel, to respond to Christ's invitation, and, when they were ready, to decide for themselves whether they wanted to be baptised. I am very glad that they have now reached a point where they feel led to take this step of faith.

And although we are not witnessing the baptisms here in this service, I want us to remember that we are one church. What is happening in our Mandarin congregation is happening within our church family, and so it is something for all of us to rejoice in and give thanks to God for. Five people are taking this important step of faith and publicly identifying themselves with Christ. That is something worth celebrating.

I would also like to speak to the rest of the congregation. Firstly, to those who have been baptised, to those who have been walking in the path of discipleship and faith: I hope that hearing about these baptisms today will cause you to remember your own baptism. And as you remember your own baptism, I hope and pray that you will be prompted today to renew your commitment of faith to Jesus Christ.

Secondly, I want to speak to those who have not yet been baptised. It may be that one reason you have not been baptised, or have not yet decided to be baptised, is that you are not yet a follower of Christ. If that is you, my word of encouragement is this: have faith in God, come to Jesus, and open your heart to the Holy Spirit. I can tell you from my own experience that if you let go and let God, you will not regret it. I certainly have never regretted my decision to turn to Christ. In fact, the greatest decision I have ever made in my life was to turn to the Lord.

Perhaps as you hear these words today, you sense God prompting your heart to turn to Christ, but you are unsure how to begin. It is not difficult. Right now, right here, you can turn to Christ and receive new life in him. You can simply speak to God in your own words, or you could pray something like this:

"Lord Jesus, I believe in you. I acknowledge you as my Saviour and Lord. Today, I want to give my life to you. Come into my heart and life, and fill me with your Holy Spirit. Amen."

Let's take a moment of quiet now and allow ourselves to pray.

Silent prayer.

Heavenly Father, we thank you for your grace and for the new life you have given us in Jesus Christ. Help us to trust in Christ, to follow him faithfully, and to walk each day in the new life you have given us. May your Holy Spirit strengthen us and draw us ever closer to you. Through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.