

Isaiah 43:1-7 But now, this is what the Lord says – he who created you, Jacob, he who formed you, Israel: ‘Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have summoned you by name; you are mine.

²When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and when you pass through the rivers, they will not sweep over you.

When you walk through the fire, you will not be burned; the flames will not set you ablaze.

³For I am the Lord your God, the Holy One of Israel, your Saviour;

I give Egypt for your ransom, Cush and Seba in your stead.

⁴Since you are precious and honoured in my sight, and because I love you,

I will give people in exchange for you, nations in exchange for your life.

⁵Do not be afraid, for I am with you; I will bring your children from the east

and gather you from the west. ⁶I will say to the north, “Give them up!” and to the south, “Do not hold them back.”

Bring my sons from afar and my daughters from the ends of the earth – ⁷everyone who is called by my name, whom I created for my glory, whom I formed and made.’

Acts 8:14-17 When the apostles in Jerusalem heard that Samaria had accepted the word of God, they sent Peter and John to Samaria. ¹⁵When they arrived, they prayed for the new believers there that they might

receive the Holy Spirit, ¹⁶because the Holy Spirit had not yet come on any of them; they had simply been baptised in the name of the Lord Jesus. ¹⁷Then Peter and John placed their hands on them, and they received

the Holy Spirit.

Luke 3:15-17 The people were waiting expectantly and were all wondering in their hearts if John might possibly be the Messiah. ¹⁶John answered them all, ‘I baptise you with water. But one who is more powerful

than I will come, the straps of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie. He will baptise you with the Holy Spirit and fire. ¹⁷His winnowing fork is in his hand to clear his threshing-floor and to gather the wheat into his barn, but he will burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire.’

Luke 3:21-22 When all the people were being baptised, Jesus was baptised too. And as he was praying, heaven was opened ²²and the Holy Spirit descended on him in bodily form like a dove. And a voice came from heaven: ‘You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased.’

The Baptism of Christ

I wonder when was the last time you attended a baptism? Was it baptising a child or an adult? Was it sprinkling water over them from a font, or was it full immersion? Was it a deeply significant, life changing moment, or simply a nice, but important occasion, done with the hope that faith would burgeon in the future?

By asking those questions, and thinking through the answer, perhaps we can see that baptism means lots of different things to different people.

The origins of baptism are similarly varied. And to help us think about it, I want to briefly talk about four related Greek words that we find in the New Testament. I’ll try to make this painless!

The words are *baptismos*, *baptisma*, *bapto*, and *baptizo*.

Before John the Baptist, Judaism already had a system of ritual washing. You may recall that at the wedding at Cana, the water that Jesus turned to wine came from six enormous stone jars, which were used for ritual washing. And you may remember that on another occasion Pharisees criticised Jesus and his disciples for not doing ritual washing. Judaism had lots of regulations about purity, which was reinforced with these repeated symbolic acts of purification. So this repeated washing is *baptismos*.

The once for all time washing of John the Baptist, and then the church, was *baptisma*. A tiny but distinguishing feature.

Both of these words are related to the word *bapto*, which signifies dipping something, and was primarily used for dip-dyeing cloth. Late in the book of Revelation, John has a vision of a heavenly warrior — ‘He is dressed in a robe dipped in blood, and his name is the Word of God.’ Dipped, here, comes from this word *bapto*.

And finally, there is a stronger version of baptizo — baptizo. This was typically used to talk of sinking a ship or drowning a man, and is the verb used to talk of baptising.

And I'm telling you all this, because I hope that this expands your view of what baptism is.

Baptism is a ritual washing — but it is more important than the ongoing washing of plates, cups and hands of rabbinic Judaism, because it was once and for all, just as Jesus's death and resurrection were once and for all.

Baptism is like dip-dyeing — it is symbolic of the way that we are to be immersed in the Holy Spirit, and forever coloured by the presence of God, active in our lives. We should not *look* the same after this, we should not *be* the same, as cloth, dipped in a rich dye is never the same.

And then, yes, baptism is a sinking, a drowning, an overwhelming of the self that was, to give rise to the self that now is, raised to life in Christ. In baptism we choose to identify with and share in Christ's death and resurrection, just as he identified with and shared in our humanity.

Words matter. While preparing for this talk I got to thinking how safe a word 'Baptism' has become. To me it conjures middle class families, dressed up for the occasion, with an infant in a christening gown. The sprinkle of water at the font is safe, the hymns are safe. The vicar's words are safe. Perhaps there is nothing wrong with this? Perhaps it does not need to be 'radical'. But let it be important! So in my head, at least (I won't say this to the parents) I want to talk of our practice as 'Holy drowning', 'holy immersion', 'holy once-and-for-all washing', 'holy dip-dyeing in the Spirit of God.'

When John the Baptist started baptising it was shocking. For one thing, he was implying that no sacrifice was required in the temple for the forgiveness of sins. This was a bit of an earthquake for the Judaism of the time. And for another — he preached repentance.

Repentance is turning around to go in a different direction. I think of it like a railway turntable — you've been going on one track, now you are turned around, to head down another track. There is something very resolute in this. There can't really be such a thing as half-hearted repentance.

This leaves a mystery then — Jesus came to John for baptism, which, after a brief protest, John acceded to. Jesus did not need to repent, he was the only one 'on the right track'. On the other hand, a facet of Jesus's incarnation was identification with humanity, so that humanity might become Godly. Jesus, the 'man-God', was baptised in the flesh, to complete his identification with us, so that we, in our baptism, might be united with him, and redeemed through him.

Jesus's baptism concluded with a powerful moment of visible, audible unity within the Trinity — the Father speaks, the dove of the Holy Spirit rests on the Son. This is what we have been talking about all along. Jesus is God made man, and man made pure — united with the Father and the Spirit. And here are we, immersed in God in our baptism, as he united himself with humankind through his baptism. This unity through baptism is part of the expression of God's love. What does your unity with Christ — and Christ's church — mean to you today?

Amen.