

St. George's, Preshute

10/01/10

Baptism of Christ

It was the Danish philosopher and thinker Soren Kierkegaard who said that Life must be understood backwards but has to be lived forwards.

I am sure that there is huge truth in that remark and that it captures something universal about human experience. But I have to say I have been thinking about it a lot this last week.

Last Sunday we celebrated the Epiphany, the actual day of which was Wednesday - 6th January, the day we celebrate the visit of the Wise Men and their famous but peculiar gifts.

Then today we mark the Baptism of Jesus and most specifically the revealing of his identity as 'You are my Son, the beloved, with you I am well pleased'. It is this revealing that Eastern Orthodox Christians concentrate on at Epiphany.

Jesus is an adult at his baptism of course and his ministry follows from it. For those who were his contemporaries they could share this with him – and live forwards. But only afterwards would they be able to understand him, most specifically only after his resurrection.

And of no part of Jesus' life can this be more true than his infancy and birth – it is understood backwards. If a remarkable itinerant preacher were to appear in our midst we would respond to what was in front of us – we wouldn't start by asking questions about his birth and earliest visitors!

In some ways Jesus' baptism and most especially the voice from the clouds speaks for itself – it can be understood at the time.

Jesus comes to the Jordan to be baptised and thereby endorses John's ministry. The voice from the clouds affirms Jesus' identity whilst the Spirit in the form of a dove then empowers Jesus for his. Jesus does not *become* God's Son at his baptism, but it is a sonship that is now publicly recognised.

But it is only looking backwards that the true significance of Jesus' baptism can be understood. It is understood in the light of the resurrection.

So what looks at first to be an act of solidarity with sinful humanity should perhaps be changed; instead of asking what baptism does to Jesus, we ask what Jesus did to Baptism. The answer, just as John suggested, is that he transforms it, to Baptism with water and spirit.

The river Jordan flows into the Dead Sea, the place where all the sins gather. But with Jesus water no longer flows to a dead end, but becomes creative of new life. And so Baptism becomes not just the forgiveness or cancelling of the past, but the beginning of a new and creative future.

No wonder, then, that the church began to understand the waters of baptism in the rich way it did. The liturgy available for today captures this using, as it does, a number of Biblical references from Genesis to Revelation for the varied way in which water affects all aspects of our lives.

In truth, however, most of these have only been 'understood backwards'. Baptism as a new creation, waters

of death and judgement, yet willing to eternal life, were understandings gained from reflection on the new creation life with Christ offers us.

Scholars found parallels with dove of the Spirit and the dove of the ark, so one early Bishop of Ravenna was able to consider this:

A dove announced to Noah that the flood had disappeared from the earth; so now a dove is to reveal that the world's shipwreck is at end forever.

What a wonderful picture - rescuing a shipwrecked world!

But let us return to how witnesses of the baptism might have 'lived forwards'

Luke's account has a significant alteration:

'Now when all the people were baptized, and when Jesus also had been baptized and was praying, the heaven was opened, and the Holy Spirit descended upon him in bodily form like a dove. And a voice came from heaven, 'You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.'

The Holy Spirit does not come upon Jesus as he is being baptized! Rather, when all the people were baptized, and when Jesus also had been baptized and was praying, then the Holy Spirit descended. Mark 1.9, Luke's source for this story, has,:

And just as he was coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on him. And a voice came from heaven, 'You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.'

Why the change?

Clearly, the effect of the change is to include the people with Jesus into the baptismal story: the voice from heaven comes after both they and he have been baptized! Their baptism required completion in his; and of course, because he is who he is, it is Jesus' baptism that makes possible the significance of theirs.

What was true in Luke's day is also true in ours – for us and our belonging to Christ in 2010.

Revd. Andrew Studdert-Kennedy