

Baptism of Christ

A sermon preached by the Rector, the Very Reverend Tim Barker, at the parish church of St Andrew in Guernsey on Sunday 13 January 2019

Readings: Acts of the Apostles 8 vv 14-17 and Luke 3 vv 15-16 & 21-22

On Friday, I did something which no Rector of St Andrew has done since 1865.

Any ideas? No?

Here's a clue. Weighing in at just under five kilograms, this is the baptism register which has recorded 2473 baptisms since Denys Henry Ozanne was baptised on All Saints Day, 1 November, in 1865 by his father, the Reverend R J Ozanne, then the Rector of St Andrew. But this old register is almost full, and is showing signs of wear and tear which must not be exacerbated. So I have bought a new register to start the new year.

Weighing only 917 grams, it may not be as imposing as the old register, but it is easier to store and is designed *not* to last as long - the advice from archivists is that registers should not be used for more than 100 years, because of the consequences of the loss of valuable genealogical and reference data from older registers. It has to be said that Rector Ozanne's handwriting was significantly more beautiful and elegant than that of some of his successors in office.

Here is the story of a Guernsey parish over 153 years. Many Guernsey names, but some more exotic names too. Who was Katherine Christiana Editha Helene Therese Schutze, the mother of a child baptised at the beginning of the twentieth century? What became of the baby girl, born in 1900 and described rather starkly in the register as an 'illegitimate child' of her mother? What was the Naftiaux Arsenal, a common address in early years? I am intrigued by twins baptised in private three days after their birth in 1909 - Rosie May and May Rosie. The addresses were brief in the early entries - just the name of the area where the family lived. One Rector couldn't be bothered to add either the parents' address or the names of the godparents.

Baptisms became less prolific as the twentieth century progressed. The names became more exotic and varied over the years. Gone are the long lists of Alfreds and Berthas. One child was baptised less than a week after the surrender of Guernsey in July 1940 and just 23 more between that date and the Liberation of Guernsey in 1945. In the late 1970s, the child of Yevgeny Yevtushenko, the world-renowned Russian poet, was baptised here whilst his parents were living in St Andrew. And goodness knows what other stories, joys and tragedies lie within these pages.

The old register will eventually be stored securely in the strong room of the Priaulx Library.

It feels right, in a curious way, to replace the baptism register on the day when we celebrate the baptism of Jesus. Although this baptism was not registered in a book such as we keep today, the baptism of Jesus has been recorded not just in the gospels but in beautiful works of art, such as the gorgeous painting by Piero Della Francesca in the British Museum.

And there is another significant difference. Our baptism is the sacramental sign of our being brought into the community of faith. It is 'an outward and visible sign of an inward and spiritual grace', to quote the Catechism from the Prayer Book, which some of us will remember from the dim and distant past as we were being prepared for Confirmation. The essence of our baptism is that we are baptised into Christ's death and

resurrection as we are immersed, either literally or symbolically, in the waters of baptism and emerge as new Christians. It is the start of something new, after which we can never be the same. Even if (as sadly sometimes happens) the commitments which parents and godparents make when their child is baptised are not followed through as we might hope, the person baptised *is* brought into the community of God's people and that indelible mark of baptism can never be rubbed out. Even when there is a conscious rejection of baptism, it remains part of that person's identity. Baptismal vows may be reaffirmed when a person who has rejected it comes back to faith, but the baptism is not repeated.

Jesus' baptism has a different symbolism. It is the public launch of his ministry, a moment when heaven and earth unite.

But it is remarkably matter of fact. 'Now when all the people were baptised, and when Jesus also had been baptised 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.'

In Luke's account of Jesus' baptism, Jesus has been standing in the queue, and is baptised after the people. Only then is there recognition. John has said nothing to identify Jesus at this point. Then God the Father speaks into the silence of Jesus' prayer. A dove appears as once it did to Noah at the end of the great flood and confirms a covenant of love into the future. This is the beginning of something new and something of the most profound significance, as was the new creation of humanity after the flood. This sign of the Holy Spirit is a promise that Jesus' ministry and everything that he does will be a demonstration of God's activity in the world. Jesus' baptism and the confirmation of his identity sees the Holy Trinity working in complete union to launch Jesus into his world changing ministry.

John the Baptist has done his work. He must now slip into the background – it is never an easy challenge to let go; it is a change that demands trust and grace. But that is what he must do.

Jesus is now the focus, and his work begins. And as at his baptism, this will be rooted in prayer.