

## BAPTISM WORDS

In the Church of Scotland we talk about two sacraments – Communion and Baptism.

Now there are those churches that only celebrate Communion about twice a year, others do it every week, and we do it every month, but even in the churches that hardly seem to mark Communion that much it's at least a recurring event.

While baptism is not.

So when you stop to think, churches put a lot of emphasis on baptism given that it's a one-off event, that it only takes about 20 seconds, that most of us who are baptised don't remember the occasion (probably because we were so young when it happened), and maybe (like me) you don't even know who did it.

But in church we still call it a sacrament and say it's important even though all that appears to happen is that somebody puts a tiny bit of water on the forehead of someone else.

There's also the story of Jesus' baptism which we heard today. It puzzles us because we wonder if he really needed to be baptised, and there's the funny thing about the voice that was heard – the voice from the heavens. It comes across as a bit of an add-on, and maybe unnecessary, And yet all of the gospel writers say something about this incident.

And what I want to say today is that the words are actually the key to the whole thing.

The words give us the reason why baptism matters so much.

Let's start with Jesus..

John the Baptist reluctantly agrees to baptise him. He dunks him under the water and then as he is coming back up there is a sound. God's voice says to him, *"You are my beloved son. With you I am well pleased."*

And we think:  
It's okay for him.  
No wonder God is pleased with him.  
No wonder God thinks highly of Jesus.  
But, of course, Jesus is a bit out of our league.

But the reason why Jesus is loved by God is not because Jesus is so good. It's because God is love.

God doesn't love Jesus because he doesn't put a foot wrong like some of us ordinary clowns.

God's love is given to Jesus because this is what God is and this is what God does.

Now it's impossible to deny that Jesus had a special place in history. Jesus was closer to God than anyone else and the words that were given to him that day were words of encouragement and commissioning for his mission.

Jesus had his own work to undertake in Palestine in the first century. But we too are called and commissioned by God and the thing we need to get into our heads is that the words that God speaks to Jesus in his baptism are the words God speaks to us.

Although we like to keep Jesus separate from us and in a different category from us because it maybe seems safer, the fact is that the words that Jesus heard are the words that God speaks to us all in our baptism.

What God chooses to say to **us** is:

*"You are my beloved son. You are my beloved daughter. With you I am pleased."*

The message '**You are my beloved son**' is not just a private individual message for Jesus.

These are the words God speaks to us **all** at our baptism.

These are the words from God to us.

*"You are my beloved son. You are my beloved daughter."*

And the reason why God tells us this is because God knows we need to hear it.

God knows that this message will make a big difference to us, if we take it to heart.

Because many of the other voices we hear have a different message.

That voice may have been our parents,  
or teachers,  
friends,  
or other adults.

The voice is often not kind, not uplifting,  
but a voice that accuses or condemns,  
that tears us down rather than building us up.

It's the voice inside that tells us that we are no good,  
that even the people who love us wouldn't if they knew the truth about us,  
it's the voice that says we are unworthy, undeserving and inferior.

The thoughts and beliefs that we have about ourselves  
and the messages we take to heart about ourselves

don't simply come from us.

They also include things from our past,  
things we grew up with,  
attitudes and opinions and criticisms that have shaped us from the outside,  
and often these messages are negative.

There is a tremendous amount of low self-esteem in people's lives.  
They may not display it,  
they may try to hide it,  
but behind the exterior, many of us don't feel good about ourselves.  
And we carry that burden with us through life,  
and it's because of that fact that God calls us to a greater and liberating  
understanding.

No, you're not perfect. Of course you have flaws.  
Of course you have made some bad mistakes.

But you are loved.  
You are a precious child of God and your worth to God is immeasurable.

And of course in the consumerist capitalist society that we live in, there are  
plenty of negative voices.  
One of the main ones tells us subtly (and not so subtly) on a daily basis, that we  
are not good enough,  
because we lack what we really need –  
the next or newest model,  
the latest appliance,  
the in-clothes,  
the makeover,  
the house in the country...

Consumerism, capitalism, advertising are all based on the premise that:  
we are less than we should be –  
we are deficient –  
we don't have enough stuff,  
we haven't enough money,  
we lack style,  
we need what the people down the road have got,  
and we continue to (literally) buy into this,  
even though we know that what is on offer isn't really going to satisfy us for long  
and we'll soon be after something else.  
Society says we **mustn't** be content.

Well, God says to us that we **can** be content.

We can be content and secure because we have God's love,  
God's care and God's protection.

Of course, knowing that we are loved makes us want to respond.  
Knowing that we are loved by God is our *call* to action, as it was Christ's.

Knowing that WE are loved means that God's love is for others as well.

Our job is to love our neighbours.  
Because they too are part of the family.

That's why we stand up for compassion,  
That's why we stand up for human rights.  
That's why we are ready to welcome the stranger,  
to befriend the rejected,  
and care for the people around us especially when they are in need.

Not because they are *more* loved or *more* important than others, but for the very obvious reason that those in most need deserve the most support.

Jesus lived and worked  
and loved and shared  
and taught and partied in **this** world.  
But the words he heard from God were a reminder to him  
that he was following another agenda,  
which was not about feeling needy, or inferior or somehow 'lacking'.  
Which was not about him buying into selfishness or feelings of inadequacy  
or accepting greed (and putting himself first) as a kind of creed to live by.

Jesus had a very different creed –  
a different way of living in the world,  
a different way of working out his identity,  
which was to do with his relationship with God and it's that that he calls us to  
discover for ourselves.

Jesus world was uncertain and scary  
and he faced opposition and difficult times just as we do today,  
but he faced it all knowing that  
the opinion that mattered most  
and the love that mattered most for him was offered by God  
and that nothing could happen  
that could make that love change, fade or fail.

It may be a long time since we were baptised.  
In fact it may be that we've *never* been baptised, but once a year at this time,  
we take a moment to remember the baptism of Jesus.

And the most important thing we do is to remind ourselves  
that we have something in common with Jesus –  
that the words he heard are offered by God to us.

They inspired Jesus to find peace in adversity and to live his life to the full..

And God offers these same words today to encourage and inspire us.

*"You are my beloved son."*

*"You are my beloved daughter."*

*"With you I am well pleased."*

That's the message, and God knows that it's important that we hear it.

Matthew 3:13-17

John 1:35-42

January 15