

12.01.2025

Fire, Water and the Holy Spirit

Scripture: Isaiah 43.1–7; Acts 8:14-17; Luke 3:15-17, 21, 22

On Christmas Eve this year, we had some incense. Before we knew it, the fire alarm had gone off and the fire brigade were here! Jokingly, I said, before I preached, “Lord, please don’t send your fire!”

I regret that now! For today, in our gospel reading, we heard John the Baptist talk of baptism – and the Spirit coming with fire! We actually really do need the fire of the Spirit!

But first: baptism! What is it? It is an odd thing, in this modern world, to take a person and immerse them or pour water over them, in public! We sort-of wash in public when we go to a swimming pool, but baptism involves you giving up control, and being a passenger. It all happens to you! Even more so when a baby is baptised.

So what is baptism about?

Jews would often wash before worship in a *mikvah*, a special place for ritual purification. So the idea of washing to remove things that defile you was already present – though the construction of these special places to wash only took off later, as Christians were building special baptismal places at the same time.

The baptism act also reminds us of the **Exodus**: the people of Israel were led out of Egypt but encountered the Sea of Reeds. On one side, they were slaves with an army chasing them. But they went down into the sea, it parted, and they came out the other side as free people, as God closed the sea and ended the army of slavery.

Thus baptism is **the liberation from earthly slavery and oppression** – it is a sign that Christ’s work is to set us free to worship and follow him. We need to remember though that we are never free – we will always be a slave to something!

Think about it: how many of us have secret addictions, a form of slavery? How many of us are slaves to our jobs? How many of us enjoy cheap products, never thinking of the people who are forced to work for tiny wages almost as slaves? **We, who think of ourselves as free, are actually still in a world full of slavery.**

But Christ frees us from that – **to become his slaves!** He says “replace yourself, and put me there in your place”.

For example, with Glen as the idol of Glen’s life, Glen will eat the things that Glen likes (lots of chocolate). Glen will watch the things Glen wants, and neglect giving to others. Glen will definitely not give any of his money away – after all, he might need it! Glen is an introvert, so Glen will definitely not make an effort to associate with others, and instead focus only on those he likes. As such, with Glen as the idol and focus of Glen’s life, Glen will become

diabetic, rude, selfish, a terrible parent, antisocial and basically worse than scrooge! It's not a great picture!

Jesus says “replace yourself with me – my burden is easy, and my yoke is light”. Christ will give you a burden to carry, but as you put him more and more as Lord of your life, you will find that his burden is so much easier than the burden of addiction and dependency.

So baptism is about the **liberation from earthly slavery**.

There is also the **symbolism of death**: the person goes down into the waters of chaos and darkness and fear – the people of ancient Israel saw the seas as a place of anarchy and fear, and a place where monsters lived. So going down into a baptismal pool was symbolic of going down into death and danger. But you don't just go down: on the other side, you come out! Out, rising into the new life of Jesus Christ, the resurrected Son of God!

And this **image of rebirth** is strong as well: going down with your sin on you, but in the waters finding purification, and being washed, and then coming away as a new person, bought for Jesus – remember, you will always belong to some power – bought to live a new, redeemed life!

And the fact that **we are passengers**, as someone else pours the water over us, or immerses us, that says something too: Jesus Christ chose you. Jesus Christ liberates you. Jesus Christ gives you a new life and calling to follow him.

It's not your work, you have not achieved heaven, you have not saved yourself, you have not earned this: **it is the gift of God**, you can only receive it – so that all glory and honour and praise goes to Him!

So if you've not been baptised, do speak to me or Daphne – if you want to commit yourself publicly to Jesus, and say “the old me needs to die, and a new me, living for Jesus, needs to rise”, then do speak to us and we can begin that journey.

And when Jesus is baptised, the voice from heaven says “you are my son, the beloved”. When we follow Christ and die and rise again in the act of baptism, he says “**you are my son, you are my daughter, the beloved, with you I am well pleased**”.

Baptism is a moment when the old person, the old Glen, the old you, dies away, and the new child of God comes forward. **And God sees us as part of Jesus, and he is well pleased!**

Jesus is modelling a step for all of us: follow me into the death and resurrection process. **Baptism is a symbol, but it is actually the rest of your life. Dying to yourself, and rising to the servant of Christ.**

But notice the mention from John the Baptist of **FIRE and the HOLY SPIRIT**.

When I was a student, I took part in a 24-hour prayer session, and we signed up to be in a room and pray for an hour. We had some items like paper, pens, things to draw with, to

reflect on, and some candles. Well, Glen thought it would be nice to write a prayer on some paper and then burn it, as a kind of burnt offering to God.

I did not for one second think about the wisdom of doing this in a room with no open window or fire extinguisher. I simply lit the corner of the paper, and – *whoosh!* The whole sheet went up very quickly. Much faster than I was expecting.

I panicked. I dropped it. It was now a burning paper on the floor – on the carpet. I really panicked. I quickly stamped on it and thank the Lord, it went out! But now I had black ash stamped into that carpet. Suffice to say, it was a mess and I was an idiot. I did my best to clean up and then cover up my stupidity, but to this day I cringe at how ridiculously naive I was!

The point of that story is: fire does not leave things unchanged. **Fire changes things.** Paper goes from being white and flexible to ashes and dust. But we can't escape the association between Fire and the Holy Spirit with **destruction** and **judgement** here. Judgement for God's people is **rescue**. It is a good thing! But fire is also **painful**. Fire purifies gold. It burns away the bad things.

The Holy Spirit of God comes in to us in the new life, when we rise as new people from the waters of baptism, and the **Holy Spirit of God begins lighting fires!**

Now, the Spirit does not force himself – there is no fire that you cannot quench. **The key is to get out of the way and let those fires burn!**

For it is the Spirit of God who gives energy to the person after baptism. God's Spirit inhabits and empowers those he loves and calls **for a purpose**. As his servants, we invite the Holy Spirit of God into our hearts and minds to begin doing the clean-out work that makes us ready to be temple's where God resides. **We become places where God comes to earth, and where the presence of God ministers to this world, restoring creation**

Today, as we come for Holy Communion, please pray for the fire of the Holy Spirit of God to come upon you, and everyone in this church. **The fire is a good fire, it burns away the bad and sets us free to be God's possession!**

Pray as you take the Eucharist for the Holy Spirit's fire, the Spirit who prepares us for our mission as God's people and servants.

Pray to be open to the Holy Spirit to come, who baptises us in God's energy and love, and pulls us from our old lives and forwards into a new life and true calling.

Please pray today for an openness to the Spirit to come upon you, and among us in this church, in ever greater power.