

Introduction

The story is told about the baptism of King Aengus by St. Patrick in the middle of the fifth century. Sometime during the rite, St. Patrick leaned on his sharp-pointed staff and inadvertently stabbed the king's foot. After the baptism was over, St. Patrick looked down at all the blood, realized what he had done, and begged the king's forgiveness. Why did you suffer this pain in silence, the Saint wanted to know. The king replied, "I thought it was part of the ritual."

The thing I have discovered in my ministry is that many people want their children to be baptised and to even be baptised themselves but aren't entirely sure what it involves or what it means. In the way that King Aengus thought that there was more to the ceremony than there actually was people are unclear about what it is and what it does for us.

There was no such vagueness about John the Baptist. He was entirely clear. What he preached was "a Baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins" So what is that and what does it mean for us?

It was public

It is important that the people came out in crowds and witnessed what was happening. Today when we baptise people we don't do it in private we do it in public that is because it is an outward sign of an inward decision to turn to God. It needs to be public – in the same way that marriage is public. We do it so that everyone may know that we want to follow Jesus

The people confessed their sins

They needed to acknowledge what was wrong in their lives and to publicly admit their failure and sin.

The Prussian king Frederick the Great was once touring a Berlin prison. The prisoners fell on their knees before him to proclaim their innocence -- except for one man, who remained silent. Frederick called to him, "Why are you here?" "Armed robbery, Your Majesty," was the reply. "And are you guilty?" "Yes indeed, Your Majesty, I deserve my punishment." Frederick then summoned the jailer and ordered him, "Release this guilty wretch at once. I will not have him kept in this prison where he will corrupt all the fine innocent people who occupy it."

That man had done wrong but he had the courage and integrity to see that he had done wrong and deserved his punishment. That is what God requires from us.

The baptism was a sign of repentance (turning around)

In his book I Surrender, Patrick Morley writes that the church's integrity problem is in the misconception "that we can add Christ to our lives, but not subtract sin. It is a change in belief without a change in behavior." He goes on to say, "It is revival without reformation, without repentance." Repentance is about changing from within.

Wabush, a town in a remote portion of Labrador, Canada, was completely isolated for some time. But recently a road was cut through the wilderness to reach it. Wabush now has one road leading into it, and thus, only on one road leading out. If someone would travel the unpaved road for six to eight hours to get into Wabush, there is only way he or she could leave---by turning around.

Each of us, by birth, arrives in a town called Sin. As in Wabush, there is only one way out--a road built by God himself. But in order to take that road, one must first turn around. That complete about face is what the Bible calls repentance, and without it, there's no way out of town.

The immersion in water symbolized a cleansing from sin and a new life

Last week some friends visited me and I decided that I would wash my hall floor in preparation for visitors.. It didn't look very dirty but when I finished and came to pour the water I had used for cleaning away it was filthy. We aren't always aware of the need for cleansing.

Need for hand washing – superbugs, hospital – spread of infections.

When Jesus washed Peter's feet at the last supper Peter asked Jesus to wash his whole self but Jesus told him that when we have been made clean we only need to wash hands and feet. When we come to Christ in repentance and faith trusting in his death on the cross we are washed clean of our sin and our relationship with God is restored. Our account is wiped clean. But day by day we make wrong choices and do wrong things and these , a bit like the germs on our hands, need to washed off so we need to return regularly to God in penitence to confess where we have gone astray.

The Holy Spirit came upon Jesus to fill him with his power

In the same way he fills us as Baptism. It is his power in us that enables us to change and to begin living new lives.

Jesus as a man had emptied himself of all his divine power and was dependant on the filling of the Holy Spirit to enable him to do his ministry.

Acts 8:14-17**Luke 3:15-17, 21-22**

Speaking to a large audience, D.L. Moody held up a glass and asked, "How can I get the air out of this glass?" One man shouted, "Suck it out with a pump!" Moody replied, "That would create a vacuum and shatter the glass." After numerous other suggestions Moody smiled, picked up a pitcher of water, and filled the glass. "There," he said, "all the air is now removed." He then went on to explain that victory in the Christian life is not accomplished by "sucking out a sin here and there," but by being filled with the Holy Spirit.

Baptism makes us God's children

At Baptism we inherit a new family. We become children of God and brothers and sisters together in Christ

Jesus identified completely with us in his humanity

One of the problems of the ivory trade and the huge number of elephants killed for their ivory is that baby elephants are left to die. There is a wonderful charity in Kenya that rescues these baby elephants and takes them to a reception centre near Nairobi to care for them until they are old enough to move on to another reserve before eventually being returned to the wild.

When the baby elis arrive at the centre they are exhausted, traumatized, hungry and very vulnerable. Each eli is allocated a keeper who gives himself entirely to their wellbeing. They sleep with the elis, feed them, wash them spend their whole time together with them replacing the mother that they have lost. The elis gradually grow and are returned to health and develop confidence. The keepers give themselves entirely to the care of the baby eli.

This is a pale image of what Jesus has done for us. He became us in order to save us.