

Solidarity

A sermon preached by Revd Prof Rob Gilbert on 10 January 2016 – the Baptism of Christ.

Readings: Isaiah 43:1-7; Acts 8:14-17; Luke 3:15-17, 21-22.

We celebrate today the baptism of Jesus and I want us to explore together just one word which I think you could argue sums up what baptism is all about, which is the word “solidarity”. Baptism is about our *solidarity* with each other, our common purpose and common life, our support and encouragement of each other. Baptism is also about our *solidarity* with Jesus, and this is a particularly important link between Christmas and Epiphany and the baptism of Jesus we remember today. *And* Baptism is about Jesus’s solidarity with God, God’s solidarity with Jesus, and because of all this, God’s solidarity with us – God’s friendship of us.

The word “solidarity” can be used in a variety of different ways.

Solidarity can be something you express – I can show you solidarity, just by sitting beside you, or if I’m feeling especially militant, going on a protest with you. Solidarity can also be something shared – we share here in St Peter’s a common purpose, a common vision, as expressed in our vision statement. Underpinning all that we achieve together is the fact we share a common baptism – and if people are not baptised, we draw them into our solidarity by recognising them anyway as our friends. *Collectively* we possess solidarity when we act together, or make a decision together, and *collectively* we can show it to others. We all here are *a solidarity* – a family – and this is helpful to remember because it underscores the fact that even if people aren’t here – because they are away, or busy, or sick or housebound, or whatever – they remain part of our solidarity, they remain *one with us*.

But what makes all *that* work is that we share a common baptism.

The reason a common baptism provides the foundation for our solidarity is that it is something we share with Christians everywhere. There really is only one Lord, one faith and one baptism. The significance of coming to church in St Peter’s is that we are doing that alongside every Christian in every part of our world – it’s the ultimate virtual reality. But much more real than the virtual reality you apparently get with a headset on. We are directly alongside Christians everywhere, and they are directly alongside us when we worship.

The most important thing that happens to a Christian is that they are baptised, because being baptised shows that they are part of one human race created and loved by God. You could say that baptism is a sign of our common humanity, it’s a way of acknowledging that we all belong to one another and are here to serve and help each other, and to love each other.

So, when the worldwide church is challenged by divisions – divisions that are structural because we fell out hundreds of years ago, or divisions which threaten us now, like the possibility of dividing over same-sex marriage and related issues – we all really need to try very hard to remember that there is only one Lord, one faith, one baptism, and that we really do belong to one another, and belong *with* one another, all Christians, everywhere.

Pope Francis visited the Lutheran Evangelical church in Rome in November. He said this:

“But I ask myself, don’t we have the same baptism? If we have the same baptism then we must walk together.... Always refer to your baptism: one faith, one baptism, one Lord. This St Paul tells us, and take the consequences from that.... Talk to the Lord and move forward. And I wouldn’t dare – I don’t dare say anything more.”

If that’s the case for Catholics and Lutherans then so much the more for people who are all supposed to be Anglican.

Our reading from *Acts* gives us a good reminder of the fact that all Christians belong together. When Peter and John lay their hands on the Samaritans – the *Samaritans*, note – they are expressing solidarity with them, and this is shown by the baptism they receive in the Holy Spirit, as the story tells it. Which prompts me to say that, this Holy Spirit they receive is about the solidarity they share – that Peter and John share with the Samaritans – and that they all share with Jesus. We have solidarity with each other and with Jesus (and with Peter and John of course, and the Samaritans) because we are all one in the Holy Spirit. So that reminds us, there's not just one Lord, one faith and one baptism, but just one Spirit too. Again, something Christians tempted to fall out with one another need to try and remember.

I would say that this aspect of baptism – that it's about our solidarity with one another – is something that many people understand, though they might be surprised to be told that. It's sometimes said that baptisms have become quite like weddings in their scale of celebration. Often baptisms we hold here in St Peter's express the solidarity of families and their friends living here and in different parts of Oxford, different parts of the country – in some cases, different parts of the world. Visiting a couple before a baptism, you get told that, for them, baptism is a celebration of community, and about family and friends being together and giving thanks. Sometimes it is also important for them that we remember people who are no longer with us here, who have died. In any case, in one word, for all these people too baptism is about solidarity.

I said that baptism is also about our solidarity with Jesus. This is pretty obvious as it's something we share *with* Jesus – you *could* say that you, and me and Jesus have this in common, at least: that we were all baptised. And you can hazard a guess that there is, in fact, historically, an unbroken chain of baptism from Jesus's own day to now. Let's leave to one side the issue of whether there's been an unbroken chain of ordination – much more importantly, I think there has been an unbroken chain of baptism. It's a solidarity that reaches back to the time of Jesus and John the Baptist themselves.

And there's another solidarity with Jesus that we should mention here too. You could argue that the significance of Christmas, as the birth of Emmanuel, God with us, is that it relies on Jesus being one of us, a human. The significance of Christmas relies on Jesus's solidarity with us. On Wednesday, we celebrated the feast of the Epiphany and the giving of gold, frankincense and myrrh to the infant Jesus. Because of Jesus's solidarity with us, because he is God with us, these are our gifts too. Gold, because we have power to make things happen, to change our world, to take responsibility for ourselves and for others; frankincense because we are all priests, we are all called to worship; myrrh because we all are human, we all have limited time.

In the Gospel story it is made clear that Jesus's own baptism proclaims God's solidarity with him. "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased". That's pretty affirming, and that's solidarity. Jesus's own baptism is a time when he realised, or understood, more clearly his solidarity with God's mission, his part in the life of God. It is also a time when people around Jesus started to realise who he was, and the work he had come to do. This is what is expressed when we are told that God's Spirit descended on Jesus "in bodily form like a dove".

In our Gospel story God shows his solidarity with Jesus by his words and in the dove. When we receive baptism we are united in that solidarity. Baptism is about God showing solidarity with us, through Jesus. As in our Isaiah reading, it's an expression of God saying "I have called you by name, you are mine... I will be with you... I love you". Baptism says that. And here's an interesting thing: baptism with water, as we do it, as John the Baptist did it, is something done *to* you. Someone pushes you under the water, or lowers you, or splashes water across your brow. But the baptism with the Holy Spirit which began with Jesus's own baptism is not something done *to* you, it's something that draws you in and unites you with the people around you. Baptism in the Holy Spirit unites you with the person next to you, and with

Christians everywhere, and with Jesus, and to God. When men and women are of one mind, when they agree together what to do; or when they are of one mind, when they collectively worship by singing together and in receiving bread and wine; what is moving between them and bringing them together when these things happen is the Holy Spirit.

So, to finish, I want us to close our eyes and imagine a baptism scene – in this church or somewhere else, the baptism of a baby or an adult, or whatever makes most sense to you.

And if you imagine a baptism scene, one in which we are all gathered around and someone is being baptised – if you imagine that, now, notice that water is being sprinkled on the person's head, and that that is something being done to them. It is a sign of life and death; of cleansing; and of God's love pouring on this human being. But notice that the water being sprinkled is also a sign that we are all gathered here, it wouldn't be happening otherwise; that we are all gathered here focused on this one person and what is being done to them, praying for that person.

And now just notice that what matters here is that we are all of one mind, and that we have solidarity with one another and with this fellow human being, because we are all focused on this event happening in front of us.

And notice that the Holy Spirit is with us, moving among us, and making us one.

Amen.