

Living Into Our Baptisms

(Luke 3 – Preached by Cheryl Willaims at Footscray Baptist Church on Jan 9th 2022)

Do you remember your baptism, if indeed you have been baptised? What was the journey you undertook to get to that point? Who baptised you? Who was there, watching, participating, witnessing the moment you made a public confession of faith? Who was the community into which you were baptised? How did it feel before you entered the water? What about afterwards?

I can't remember my baptism as I was just three months old. I grew up in the Anglican church and the practice was to baptise infants and have god-parents make promises on your behalf, one of which was to present you to the bishop for your confirmation, that time when you reaffirmed your baptismal vows after a period of learning. I was twelve when I did that. My family took baptism seriously and saw it as my first step into the faith and the moment I became a member of that community of faith. Even though I was a baby they trusted that community to form me in the faith.

I do remember affirming those vows, as a child I did it every year at Easter, we all gathered and said our baptismal vows again, they grew more and more real every year.

When I became a Baptist and then trained for the ministry this posed a problem for the denomination who did not recognise infant baptism, despite the churches I had been members of doing such, just as Footscray Baptist Church does. The age old questions of how much water, who baptised, how old was I, came to the fore. These questions have divided the Christian church for millennia unfortunately. Some see baptism as a bit like an insurance policy, others a rite of passage, others an obligation, others just something you do, yet others an initiation into the faith and the community of believers.

When my godson was four, he and his sister were baptised as children. This posed a bit of a dilemma for me as I had become a 'Baptist', even more of a dilemma when he was about to be baptised and he said loudly for all to hear that he 'didn't want to do this', brought on by walking in the rain to the church and his godfather scaring him a bit. What was I to do, here he was saying no? I had to think deeply and quickly. I came to the conclusion that in this tradition I was taking on vows on his behalf and it was my job to see that he was brought up in the faith (I did my best) and he was formally joining this community of faith who would nurture and teach him, which they did.

To be ordained I had to do some thinking about baptism and with the help of some of the best theological minds in Victoria came up with a service where I publicly reaffirmed my baptismal vows and my desire to follow Jesus into ministry – that is another story for another day.

Used to reaffirming my baptismal vows annually this was not too big a deal for me, but let me tell you it was for the hierarchy of the Baptist Union, unfortunately they still have not really progressed this idea and other ministers have faced similar problems as I did.

Jesus had no such problem and of all of us had the least need to be baptised. Down to the Jordan he goes with everybody else and is baptised by John. He knows what we all need to learn, that baptism isn't dependent on our works, on our worthiness, our deep theological thinking, it is God's business. It is here that God uses water as a tangible sign of His grace. It is here that we are formally incorporated into the community of believers both local and world-wide. It is here that we have a tangible sign of God's Spirit resting on us, shaping us and moulding us for mission and ministry.

Jesus didn't need to be baptised but he chose to join his fellow humans and undergo it. And what happens, a voice from heaven affirms all that he is and tells all around that with him God is well pleased.

This moment marks the beginning of Jesus' very public ministry. Over the next three years he will teach thousands about a new way of living that involves loving, forgiving and peace. He will heal those who need healing in body, mind and soul. He will welcome the outsider into his midst. He will treat women and the outcast with dignity. He will upset the status quo, find himself in trouble a lot, gather a group of disciples around him, face a false trial, be sentenced to death and rise again to show us that darkness can never overcome the light. Is that what you signed up for when you got baptised?

Our baptisms wherever and whenever they occurred mark a moment when we publicly acknowledge God's role in our life. A moment, when we understand ourselves to be part of this motley crew of believers who will do their best to follow in the footsteps of Jesus. A moment we understand to be a tangible sign of God's care for us.

Today in this service we have said a prayer in which we reminded ourselves of the meaning of baptism and recommitted ourselves to living the faith to the best of our ability.

Baptism isn't magical but it is a sign and reminder that we are God's beloved, that God has adopted us into this family we know as the church.

All we need to do is live out that baptism.

As we begin 2022 maybe you can ponder the way in which you will live out your faith, who will you stand with and what will you stand for. How will you practice love and forgiveness?

As you journey through this year and beyond. May God's Spirit be upon you – calling you, challenging you, exciting you, leading you and may you hear the voice of God saying to you – this is my child, my beloved which whom I am well pleased. Amen.