

*A sermon for the Feast of the Baptism of the Lord – **Episcopal Church Baptism***

"I truly understand that God shows no partiality, but in every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him."

In our Baptism of the Lord Sunday gospel, Jesus appears at the river Jordan to begin his ministry and the imagery that is employed is not the brandishing of a fiery sword and the bellowing of a call to arms, but the hovering of a gentle dove and a voice that utters words that are not "This is my Son the Almighty, the Magnificent, the Powerful," *a la Wizard of Oz*, but rather "This is my Son, the Beloved." The power of love in the image of a gentle dove. Strength and gentleness in perfect balance, in delightful harmony.

And this – the message of gentle strength – is what our Episcopal understanding of Baptism is all about. This Sunday, as always on the First Sunday After Epiphany, we recall the Baptism of the Lord. It gives each of us the occasion as well to renew the gentle strength of our individual Covenants of Baptism .

Not all of us, including myself, entered Christianity through the portal of Episcopal Church Baptism, so—on this Baptism of the Lord Sunday—let me explain something about Baptism as it is celebrated in the Episcopal Church. Baptism is one of the few things that almost all Christians can agree upon. Very few denominations will re-baptize someone originally baptized into Christianity in a different church. Most churches receive or record the Baptism, recognizing that as you are born physically only once, so you are born spiritually only once.

Now, having said that Baptism is pretty much a universally recognized sacramental ritual, why do I say it's different to be baptized Episcopalian?

What's different about it? Why does it matter how a person enters Christianity if the same Baptism is done in all Christian communities from Catholic to Pentecostal, and most of the churches now recognize each other's Baptisms?

The difference emerges not from the sacrament itself, but it what flows from its reception in different faith traditions. For example, if one enters Christianity through Roman Catholic baptism, usually as an infant, that ritual is perceived to perpetually bind one to papal authority. If a baptized Catholic gets married but is not married by a Catholic priest, the marriage is not recognized and is easily annulled if the person wishes to remarry in the Catholic Church. Evangelical baptism, which is not for children and which is received only in response to the acceptance of Jesus as Saviour – is perceived to assure one of membership in an exclusive club – the Saved. And not everyone – not by a long shot – is, in this view, Saved.

By your Baptism in the Episcopal Church OR by your transferring your Baptism into the Episcopal Church, such as by Confirmation, you begin to live your Christianity with an Episcopal emphasis. What does that mean? How does that differ from some other Christian Church practice?

Two words: tolerance and inclusion.

Your Christianity as an Anglican, an Episcopalian, acknowledges that it is not the only religion that leads people to God. That acknowledgement is based upon this important fact: God is God. God does not belong to us. We belong to God. God does not belong to any religion. God is not a Christian. God is not a Jew. God is not a Buddhist or a Mormon or a Hindu. God is God. We are Christians and our neighbors are Jews and Muslims and Mormons and we all must follow the pathway to God that we come to believe is the best for us. I believe I have chosen the

best pathway to God in Christianity. I do not believe I have chosen the only pathway.

I see my Christianity as a unique treasure. But I hold that treasure, as St. Paul says, in a clay pot. I am required by my faith choice to share what I believe, but I listen to St. Peter who says, *“always be ready to share the reasons for the hope that is within you, but do it with gentleness and respect.”* There it is: strength and gentleness. Strength of conviction; gentleness of judgment about others. Episcopal Baptism.

At the end of the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus says to his disciples gathered before him after his Resurrection, “Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit,” and he goes on to say, “teaching them...” Teaching them... “Make disciples and teach.” Discipleship and teaching are about sharing the hope that is within you, not about condemning those who believe sincerely yet differently about the God who is not a Christian nor a Jew nor a Muslim, but who is God.

The gentle strength reflected in Anglican baptism is seen in other beautiful words of St. Peter in the Book of Acts: *“I truly understand that God shows no partiality, but in every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him.”*

I consider myself tremendously blessed to belong to the tradition of Anglicanism, a religion view forged in the context of the emergent British—not Roman—Empire, exposed early on, in that 16th century of New World discovery, to the religions of the Orient, of Africa, of the New World – raising up a tradition of believers who are strong in their conviction and gentle in their judgment about the beliefs of others.

Our Episcopal Baptism is seen to bind us to Christ, but it binds us only after we

agree to be bound at some point in our lives. Whether formally by Confirmation or informally within your own conscience – you must somehow, sometime, agree by your adult free will to bind yourself to Christ Jesus. Our Episcopal understanding is that this is not imposed upon you in infant Baptism. It is precisely this which makes sense of infant baptism. We Anglicans stand in the middle—appropriate for the bridge church of Christianity—between the infant and adult baptism poles. We baptize infants but impose nothing upon them. For it takes an adult to finally “receive” or “activate” that baptism.

But neither does Episcopal baptism put you in a club that, *a priori*, excludes anyone from heaven who has not similarly been baptized. It absolutely does NOT offer you *carte blanche* salvation, but only Christ’s amazing grace which alone can bring us to salvation.

Because it is Episcopal, your baptism, beloved ones of God, makes you strong AND keeps you gentle at the same time—as our scriptures this morning proclaim: *The voice of the Lord is upon the waters; the God of glory thunders ... [as] the Holy Spirit descends in bodily form like a dove..* You are included by your baptism in the community of faith and that Episcopal baptism prepares you to include all others. This Baptism does not exclude – and it teaches you not to exclude anyone.

Strength of Conviction. Gentleness of Judgment. Be strong in your convictions and be gentle in your judgments. This is Anglicanism. This is Episcopal Baptism. “Go, therefore, and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.” AMEN

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