

One of the most startling things I was ever taught at theological college was about baptism, by our liturgy teacher Fr Paul Hannaford. He said “The most important thing is that, however we do the baptism, sprinkling or dunking, we have to use enough water to kill people.” That at one level is a very odd thing to say, at another it's the key understanding of baptism. St Paul says, “We die when we are baptised.” Whether you remember your baptism or not, you died at the baptismal font. That is one of the keys to what it means to be a Christian. Most of the time in this church, we baptise little children. We don't often know what to expect. The baby could start screaming (and we've had a couple of those), or the baby could coo and smile which I am pleased to say is usually the norm. Either way, the cuteness factor is pretty high. We also have the tradition of applauding the infant introducing her or him into the household of God.

But Paul reminds us that something deeper is going on than that. At the moment of baptism, we are so deeply united with Christ that we are “buried” with him. Our entire life up to that point has been finished off, and now something new begins. Christian baptism is not supposed to be a ceremony on anybody's social calendar. It is not a predictable little ritual at a certain time in a person's life. At its deepest meaning, baptism is the event when we are marked as clearly as a Jewish child being circumcised. Life is going to be different from that day forward.

Paul says, “The old life dies when we get baptised.” All our sins are killed off through Christ's death through the waters of baptism. All our destructiveness is destroyed. Everything that kept us from the joy and freedom of the gospel is now loosed, and we are free to live in the love of Jesus Christ. Provided, of course, that we let the old life die. Ever notice? Sometimes people can have an experience when they were as good as dead. When they emerge, everything is fresh and new. They are not bound and held captive as they once were. In a very real sense, life begins after something has died. Paul says that this experience lies at the heart of the Christian life. For a couple of chapters in his letter to the Romans, he has been arguing on behalf of grace. As he continues to remind us, God saves us through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. We are made righteous, not by our own righteous deeds, but by the righteous work of Christ's sacrificial love. In the cross of Jesus, God has forgiven us even before we knew we needed to be forgiven. The grace of God surrounds us. We can't earn it; we can only believe in it, trust it and welcome its power into our lives.

Not a bad deal, says the critic. We sin and God forgives. If that's true, we can keep sinning and God will keep forgiving. In fact, we can do something really, really bad, and God will let us off the hook. But Paul says, “No!” Baptised people must not keep sinning, because they have passed out of a life of sin. Look at what happened: The old you was drowned in the baptismal font. Now you are a new creation, raised to live a new life. All the powers that hurt and destroy don't have any dominion over you.

A man was talking to me about his gambling problem. It started small: the footie tipping, a few lottery tickets. Before he knew it, he was taking the food money for the family and losing it in the pokies of the local RSL. Then it got worse. He confessed, “I lost my family, I lost my job, I lost my house. I lost everything and everybody dear to me. I sank so low that I wanted to lose my life. Then I realised I already had lost that life. Everything was gone, and I couldn't pretend otherwise. That was the day when my life began to turn around.” That may sound harsh. Some of us would like to coast along and get by on our own steam. Sure, we get into a little trouble now and then. Everybody does. Most of the time we merely recalibrate the carburettor, without ever getting a whole new engine. We don't allow any interruptions to affect our schedule, our pocketbook, or what we do after dark. Paul sounds rather blunt when he claims that we cannot live unless the old life has died. But then again, some people are lifted right out of the dust, because they were willing to let go of the wreckage they once suffered.

From time to time, we lose jobs. We give up routines. We watch our children grow up and move away. We change addresses. We lose marriages. We mourn loved ones. All of these losses are real, and hurtful — and all of them are also reminders that we cannot completely become Christian until we say, “Good-bye” to the old ways.

Remember that poem by T. S. Eliot? It’s an Epiphany poem called *The Gift of the Magi*. One of the three Wise Men reflects on seeing the newborn Christ child, and he says, “Were we led all that way for birth or death? There was a birth, certainly ... I shall be glad of another death.”(1)

It is a curious line. In Christ, death looks like birth. When Jesus is born, the whole world is silently, secretly, changed. Because of the child in that manger, because of the things he has said and done, everything is different. So Eliot puts those words on a Magi’s lips, confessing that he is “no longer at ease in the old dispensation.”

Paul says, “Don’t you know that all of us who have been baptised into Christ Jesus were baptised into his death? We have been buried with him by baptism into death, so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life.”

When finally all the pain and horror of this virus are past, I hope and pray, the sharp focus about what is really important which it has brought about and forced upon us, will mean that we at Holy Trinity will be baptised into a renewal of the faith, that rights the wrongs of our taking for granted and/or indifference to Jesus and his Church. That we will lament that past and seek forgiveness, to be baptised into new beginning. That the squabbling over petty matters, the fault finding and petty power struggles, which now look so absurdly ridiculous will not re-emerge, so that we along with Eliot’s Magi will no longer be at ease in that old dispensation. When this is all over Christ is calling us this very day to concentrate on new birth, renewal and growth and **not** re-setting into our comfort zone, in doing things the way we always did them.

Sooner than later I hope we will have another baptism at Holy Trinity Kew. It will be to baptise a precious little child of God. I am sure he or she is going to smile at you and win you over. A precious gift of God who is being raised by her loving parents and we will be thrilled and delighted. I have only one request to make. After we baptise them, would somebody please tell them what they has got themselves into?

1. T. S. Eliot, *The Gift of the Magi*, Selected Poems (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1964), p. 98.

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