

**“From the depths” a sermon preached by Kerry Enright at Knox Church  
Dunedin New Zealand on 21 February 2016.**

This week we begin our Lenten studies and over the next four weeks our evening service will introduce each of the studies, using Rowan Williams book. Remarkably, nearly 50 people have registered to join our study groups and more have indicated a desire to join, a wonderful response.

Much of what I say is drawn from Rowan William’s book Being Christian – Baptism, Bible, Eucharist, Prayer SPCK London 2014. I will be quoting extensively from the book.

The four basic activities of being Christian have remained constant and indispensable for the majority of people who call themselves Christian – being received into full membership by having water poured or sprinkled over them; reading the Bible; gathering to share bread and wine in memory of the death and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth and praying

Four basic activities, tonight baptism.

People are formally brought into the Christian community by being dipped in water or having water poured over them.

Baptism means dipping.

Jesus speaks of the suffering and death that lies ahead of him as a baptism he is going to endure. He speaks of his going towards suffering and death as a kind of immersion in something, being drowned or swamped in something. He has an immersion to go through, and until that immersion is complete, his work is incomplete.

So the ritual of joining the Christian community carries the idea of going down into the darkness of Jesus suffering and death, being swamped by the reality of what Jesus endured. Paul speaks of being baptised into the death of Christ.

As the early church reflected on baptism, they thought about the baptism of Jesus, of going down into the river Jordan, and coming out of the water, and

the Holy Spirit descending on him in the form of a dove, and a voice from heaven “you are my son”.

They thought back to an earlier story of the spirit, at the very beginning of creation when there was a watery chaos. And over that chaos the Holy Spirit hovered and a great wind blew. There is chaos, then the wind of God’s spirit, and God says, this is good. The water, the spirit, the voice: baptism.

So the beginning of Christian life is a new beginning of God’s creative work. Just as Jesus came up out of the water, receiving the spirit and hearing the voice of the father, so the newly baptised person hears the voice “You are my son or daughter”, and so begins the association with Jesus.

Williams notes how in Eastern icons, you see Jesus up to his neck in water and beneath the waves are the river gods of the old world, representing the chaos that is being overcome. So we see images ...

Water and rebirth; rebirth as a son or daughter of God; chaos moving into order as the wind of God blows on it.

So baptism became thought of as a restoration of what it is to be truly human. To be baptised is to recover the humanity that God first intended. God intended that people would grow into such love for God and such confidence in God that they would rightly be called God’s sons and daughters. Now humans have let go of that identity, forgotten it or corrupted it. So Jesus comes to restore human beings to their humanity. And to do that Jesus descends into the world of chaos, he comes down fully to our level, to where things are shapeless and meaningless, to a state of vulnerability and unprotectedness.

So the new humanity, the restored humanity, reaches out its hands from the depths of chaos, to be touched by the hand of God. So where do we then expect to find people who have been baptised? We expect to find them in the neighbourhood of chaos, in those places where humanity is most at risk, disordered, disfigured, needy, in the chaotic places. That is where we will find baptised people, accompanying people there, alongside people there, mixing with people there. Baptism says that we spend our lives being led towards the chaos and neediness of humanity that has forgotten who it is.

At the same time, the baptised person is in touch with their own chaos and neediness. We live with a lot of inhumanity and muddle inside us. So a baptised person need not be afraid to look with honesty at the chaos inside, as well as at the risk outside.

Shannon Kershner at Fourth Presbyterian in Chicago tells this story

A church was having a small group Bible study one Wednesday morning. The leader asked those sitting in the circle, “Who has been Jesus for you in your life? Who has helped you see the face of Christ?” People grew quiet as they pondered who they might name—a grandmother, a father, a dear friend, a beloved pastor. One older woman spoke up. “I suppose I have to ask myself,” she began, “who has told me the truth about myself so completely that I wanted to kill him for it.” After that, no one else spoke.

Baptism means being with Jesus in the depths, the depths of human need, including the depths of our own need - and the depths of God’s love, in the depths where the Spirit is recreating and refreshing human life as God meant it to be.

So baptism does not mark us off from others. It is not a claim to be made, or a privilege or a status to be referred to. Rather baptism pushes us to a new level of solidarity with other people, a sense that we have been affected, contaminated by the same mess of humanity as everyone else.

So at the same time as we celebrate being washed and renewed, we also are pushed into the middle of a human situation that may hurt us, that may mar us, that may ask us to look at our lives and commitments all over again.

So the gathering of people who are baptised is in no way a gathering of like-minded people, birds of a feather flocking together, of people who are in some way better, or elite or separate. It is a gathering of people who accept what it means to be in the heart of the messy, contaminated and needy world, and we among them. You don’t go in the waters of the Jordan without coming out muddy.

It is there that we can be honest, transparent, unpretentious, open, defenceless. We do not need to be more than we are, with others and with

God. We can go into risk and darkness, and there receive the Spirit who allows us to call God Father or Mother, in a relationship of intimacy, the mother hen image from this morning.

We expect then to see among people who have been baptised, an openness to human need and a corresponding openness to the Holy Spirit. As Williams says, we are in the middle of to things that seem contradictory ... we are in the middle of the ecstatic joy of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit; and we are in the middle of the a world of threat, suffering, sin and pain.

So Jesus says, where I am, there will be my servant also.

And it is from that that prayer emerges, down in the depths, in the depths of our living, and in the depths of God's life in our world.

This is only the first part of the study for this week, so I invite you to read the book for yourself.

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