

Baptism - True Identity

Series: Baptism sermon

Date: 16 November 2025, 22nd Sunday after Trinity

Location: St George's Battery Point

Texts: Ezekiel 36.25-27; Titus 3.3-8; Galatians 3.26-4.7; John 3:1-17

When I started university as I walked from the train station to the orientation day, I was deeply conscious that this was a new beginning. I was going into a totally new environment. I was about to meet a whole bunch of people who didn't know me. To them I was a blank canvas. And so I could be anyone. I could be a different person from who I had been at high school, or at church. It was a new start, and I had something of a choice to make. It's a choice we all go through as we grow up, and move out from under the wings of our parents and become our "own person", whatever that means.

Today Daisy and Amy are going to get baptised, and Francesca and William are going to confirm for themselves the promises made at their baptisms. I want to take just a few moments to explore what baptism is, and I want to look at baptism through the lens of two of the deepest questions we all face in life. Who am I? And Where do I belong?

The message we are constantly told by our culture in movies and on TV is that "You can be whoever you want to be". "You can do whatever you want to do and be whoever you want to be, just believe in yourself. Be true to yourself."

This is a message that springs from our deep commitment to the ideas of freedom and authenticity. On the one hand this is how we define freedom: namely the right to determine for yourself who you are and how you will live without interference from others. On the other, this is what we mean by authenticity. That who I am cannot be determined from something or someone outside myself, but comes from within. Authenticity means I have a moral obligation to discover who I am and to live that out.

But this answer to the question of, "who am I?" falls short on several grounds. First it places a great burden on each of us. You might spend a whole lifetime peering within yourself and never find who you truly are. And even if you did, how could you be sure what you discovered was really you? Or, worse still, what if you don't like who you discover?

But, perhaps more importantly, the idea that you can “be whoever you want to be” ignores the social reality of who we are. Before we have any idea of ourselves as “I”, we are already known and loved by our parents and family, and indeed given names - Daisy, Amy, Francesca, William.

We know the incredible power words spoken to us and about us have had in shaping our lives. The word of a parent or favourite teacher can set the course of our lives for years to come for good or bad. “You’re a good girl”. “You’ll never amount to anything.” There is an interplay between who we are and what others say about us. We all long to hear those words of love and approval from those who matter most to us.

All of which is to say that who we are is not first and foremost something that we determine for ourselves. Rather it is a gift. It is something spoken to us by others and in their words we recognise ourselves and so receive the truth of who we are.

What has all of this talk of identity got to do with baptism? Our lives are filled with a mass of competing voices that lay claim to who we are. Both the voices of those around us and the voice of our own self doubt and uncertainty. We long to hear a definitive word in which we can recognise the truth about ourselves. Only in this word will we find peace for our restless souls. Baptism is a sign that points to this word. It is a visible word of God’s grace to us.

The Church is the family of God the Father. And just like you are born into a biological family, so you become a member of God’s family through spiritual re-birth. Jesus says, “No one can enter the kingdom of God unless they are born of water and the Spirit.”¹ Baptism with water is the external and visible sign given by Jesus himself that the church uses to point to the internal and unseen work of the Holy Spirit giving spiritual rebirth.

In Titus we saw our natural state this side of the fall: “At one time we too were foolish, disobedient, deceived and enslaved by all kinds of passions and pleasures. We lived in malice and envy, being hated and hating one another.”² We’re all children of Adam. We too listen to the uncanny lies that whisper in our ears and are deceived. We foolishly participate in and perpetuate Adam’s disobedience. We’re enslaved by our own selfish desires. Malice, envy, being hated and hating one another. If that doesn’t describe our polarised world of social media and

¹ John 3.5

² Titus 3.3

international conflict I don't know what does. We're in the kingdom of darkness, cut off from the source of life, spinning out towards death.

But what does St Paul say?

But when the kindness and love of God our Saviour appeared, **5** he saved us, not because of righteous things we had done, but because of his mercy. He saved us through the washing of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit, **6** whom he poured out on us generously through Jesus Christ our Saviour, **7** so that, having been justified by his grace, we might become heirs having the hope of eternal life.³

Christ has defeated sin and death through the cross. Through Jesus, God offers forgiveness, reconciliation and new life. But for us to participate in the life of the New Adam, that old way of life has to die. So as we go down into the waters of baptism, we plunge into Jesus' death. As we come out of the water we leave the old life in the watery tomb and rise to life, reborn, cleansed and renewed by the Holy Spirit. Paul writes, "If anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has gone, the new has come!"⁴

Notice that this is a gift. Christ saves us, not because we've earned it, not because we've done enough, not because of the good we've done, but because of his infinite mercy, because he loves us. Baptism is that visible word of God's grace, his undeserved gift to us. We don't baptise ourselves. It is not something we can do. It has to be done to us, and that is because it is God's gift, given through the body of Christ the church, to us unworthy sinners.

Because baptism means new birth into the family of God, traditionally when people were baptised, be they infants or adults, they were given a new name, their *Christian* name, the name by which they would be known from this point forward. That's why baptism is sometimes called a christening. It's also why we often call your first name your *Christian* name, even if most people are no longer Christians! I share this because it points to the fact that your baptism now defines who you are - a loved child of God, a new creation, a member of the body of Christ.

In Galatians St Paul writes we are baptised *into* Christ. In baptism, the Spirit unites us to Christ such that his death becomes our death, and his life our life. We are made members of his body, the Church. This is how the apostle Paul puts it in Galatians 3.26

³ Titus 3.4-7

⁴ 2 Corinthians 5.17

You are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus, 27 for all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. 28 There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus. 29 If you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's seed, and heirs according to the promise.

This new identity relativises the other identities we might have - racial, wealth, class or status, gender. *There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.* It's not that these don't exist, but they no longer define and divide us.

Second, this new identity is defined by Christ. Christ is at the centre. He determines this new identity. Who we are by baptism through faith is who we are *in him*. We belong to him. And if we belong to him, so we belong to his family, the church.

Finally, notice who we are in Christ - namely *sons of God*. At first glance this might appear sexist - why sons rather than children? Because, by the Spirit, we are invited into the very relationship of *the* eternal Son of God with his Father so that he becomes our Father. This takes us to the heart of who we are before God, the heart of the Christian faith, and the whole reason we celebrate Christmas. You can see it there in Galatians 4.4

But when the time had fully come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under law, 5 to redeem those under law, that we might receive the full rights of sons. 6 Because you are sons, God sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, the Spirit who calls out, "Abba, Father."

Here is the great news of the Christian faith. By rights each of us are a mixed up mess of the names we're given by ourselves and others, both good and bad. There is only one who truly has the right to be called the Son of God. But what belongs to Jesus by rights belongs by adoption to those who trust in Christ. This is God's great gift to us. That we may share in the very relationship of the eternal Son with the Father. That God's word to Jesus may be his word to you and to me, to Daisy and Amy, to Francesca and William, "You are my Son. With you I am well pleased."

In baptism, the story of Jesus is made personal. It is your story. It is the Gospel with your name on it. You died with Christ. You are made alive with Christ. You are washed clean. You are forgiven. You receive the Holy Spirit. God's future is now yours. You are "heirs, having the hope

of eternal life.”⁵ You are what God says you are, and no one else, not the bullies at school or work, not the insults of the world, not the destructive thoughts in your mind, not your feelings or desires, in baptism you belong to God who declares indelibly and without reservation that he loves you. And all this is the gift of God to be received with faith. Your baptism is God’s pledge of all these things. The promise of his gift. A sign to strengthen you in your faith.

And baptism tells you how you are to live: as an obedient child of God, a disciple of Christ. Did you see it there in Titus? “And I want you to stress these things, so that those who have trusted in God may be careful to devote themselves to doing what is good.”⁶

At the beginning of his ministry, Jesus said, “The time has come. The kingdom of God is near. Repent and believe the Good News.” And at the birth of the church, having preached of God’s gift of life in Christ, the apostle Peter says to those listening, this is how you receive this gift, “Repent and be baptised, every one of you, in the name of Jesus for the forgiveness of sins. And you will receive the promised Holy Spirit.”⁷ So today, Daisy and Amy, will come and do just that. First repenting - publicly rejecting the old life of selfishness and participation in evil, and turning to Christ as Saviour and Lord. And second, believing, confessing that they believe in the one true God, who saves us through his Son the Lord Jesus, and lives in us by his Holy Spirit. And Francesca and William will repeat the same promises, declaring publicly for themselves that Christ is their Saviour and Lord. And, following the custom of the early church, bishop Chris will lay hands on all 4, and confirming them and praying that the Holy Spirit might empower them to live as disciples of Christ, devoting themselves to doing what is good.

All of us long to be known and loved, to have a name and a family. In baptism God names you as his child. In the Church, God gives you a family. Today we celebrate the new life, the name and family God gives Amy, Daisy, Francesca and William. For those of you who are baptised, today is a reminder that baptism defines our lives. We can rest in our Father’s love. We can live the life of Christ that he calls us to in his body. If you’ve not been baptised, or if you’re not sure where you stand with Jesus, then why not make this a day you declare you’re all in? He will give

⁵ Titus 3.7

⁶ Titus 3.8

⁷ Mark 1.15, Acts 2.38

you new life, a family and a future. Come and have a chat with me, or one of these 4. We would love to help you make this step.