

Matthew 3:13-17 Following in the footsteps of Jesus

Introduction

Today we have gathered to celebrate with Lucas as he has, in public, confessed his faith in Jesus. What he has done today is not a novelty, but something practised in the Christian Church for near 2,000 years. In that time men and women, young women and young men have testified that they have dedicated their lives to follow someone who gave everything for them. Although there are a variety of expressions of it in practice, 33% of the world's population claims to follow Jesus. Yet that is not the reason why we take this step. It is a personal choice which each one of us needs to take for ourselves, following our prior decision to commit our lives to follow Jesus. Have you put your faith and trust in Jesus? If not can I encourage you to take that step today? Are you a Christian who has put off getting baptised? Can I encourage you to come forward and take this step of public witness. It is not so much a question of age; rather it is at the right time for you when you want to let other people know that you have given your life to follow Jesus. There is no more important step you can take than this one.

What is baptism? Is it essential for salvation? And does your eternal destiny depend on it as the Roman Catholic Church taught (with respect to infant baptism) until a few years ago? In this regard we remember the criminal hanging on the cross next to Jesus who cried out: *Jesus remember me when you come into your kingdom. Jesus answered him: 'I tell you the truth, today you will be with Me in paradise* (Luke 23:42-43). Baptism is not essential for salvation. There will be Christians in heaven who though late conversions; lack of opportunity or medical indisposition or some other legitimate reason who were not able to take this step of faith, but who received an equally warm welcome from their Saviour and Lord. So where does that leave us? Is it an optional extra for the really keen Christians, like the professional sports people who stay behind for extra training after everyone else has gone home; or the office worker who puts in, voluntarily, some extra unpaid hours of work? Or is it a command of Christ for believers?

1. Why be baptized?

(a) The Example of Jesus (Mathew 3:13-17) *Then Jesus came from Galilee to the Jordan to be baptised by John.¹⁴ But John tried to deter Him, saying, I need to be baptised by You, and do You come to me?¹⁵ Jesus replied, Let it be so now; it is proper for us to do this to fulfil all righteousness. Then John consented.¹⁶ As soon as Jesus was baptised, He went up out of the water. At that moment heaven was opened, and He saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and lighting on Him.¹⁷ And a voice from heaven said, This is my Son, whom I love; with Him I am well pleased.* Baptism is a symbol of cleansing from sin. Jesus is perfect, sinless and the Son of God. There was no need for Him to be baptised. So why did He feel that it was necessary for Him to take that step? *to fulfil all righteousness* (Matt.3:15). In other words, it was because He believed that God wished Him to take that step and to take it as an example to each and every one of His followers. Jesus' number one desire was to do what he believed most pleased His father in heaven. When His actual, baptism takes place we see not only the approving words from His father but also the presence of the Holy Spirit descending upon Him in the form of a dove. His action was publicly vindicated. It was an extraordinary occasion and one that was extremely important to God to honour His Son in this way. This naturally implies that it is equally high on the agenda for the followers of Jesus- or it should be! Have you as a Christian been baptized? I am aware that Christians can have some differences on how this ordinance is administered that may be with us this side of heaven, but I trust the principle of its

importance is held by each and every follower of Jesus here today. What Lucas is doing today is something that her Lord and Saviour modelled 2,000 years ago.

(b) **The Command of Jesus** (Matthew 28:19-20) *Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptising them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit,²⁰ and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age.*

What is the context of these words? Jesus has been raised from the dead and is shortly to return to His Father in heaven. He is giving some final instructions to a large group of His followers. If you or I were giving final instructions to people close to us before they or we were going away for a very long time then I think that the issues we would mention would be of the greatest importance to us. This was certainly true here for Jesus. Notice carefully the word order here. Christians have to *go* ie take the initiative in evangelism not expect people to come to us. What are we to do? *make disciples of all nations* This includes not only seeking to bring people to faith in Christ, but also to help them grow and develop in their faith because Jesus wants life long learners of Him; long term followers of their Lord; people who not only pray a prayer of commitment at a particular time, but also want to grow in knowledge of their faith and in their relationship with God through the enabling power of the Holy Spirit. As a result our testimonies will not only be what God did in bringing us to faith in Christ, but also what the Lord has done in more recent days as we have been open to the leading and guidance of the Holy Spirit. What specifically does ‘making disciples mean’? The first step of Christian discipleship here is *baptising them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit* – this is why we describe this act of Christian initiation as ‘believers’ baptism’. Although there are various patterns of Christian discipleship which in part are affected by our family circumstances or upbringing the implication of Jesus’ words here is that the usual pattern will be for a Christian early in their faith journey to follow the command of their Lord and be baptised upon the public confession of their faith in Him. Are you here today as a Christian who has not been baptised, but who knows that this is a step you need to take? However you may be here as someone who needs to take the earlier step of committing your life to Jesus –can I encourage you to give your life to Jesus –you will most certainly not be disappointed with Him. Other people disappoint us sadly but He never does.

2. Who should be baptized?

Peter replied, Repent and be baptised, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins. And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit (Acts 2:38). Infants or Believers? The reports of the *Anglican Joint Committees on Baptism, Confirmation and Holy Communion* (1959, p.34) admitted that New Testament or Apostolic Baptism in the first three centuries stressed: ‘the condition of faith consciously fulfilled prior to the reception of this sacrament’. Dom Gregory Dix, possibly the greatest Anglo-Catholic scholar of liturgical practice in the Church of England in the 20th Century (in his *The Theology of Confirmation*, p. 28, cited by G. Beasley-Murray, *Baptism in the NT*, p. 310) corrected the claims of those within his communion who argued that infant baptism followed by confirmation was apostolic practice. He declared that they were ‘talking historical nonsense’. *Baptist Eucharist and Ministry*, the well-known World Council of Churches 1982 publication, also acknowledged that: ‘baptism upon personal profession of faith is the most clearly attested pattern in the New Testament documents’ (*BEM* (Faith and Order Paper 111; p. 4 paragraph 11). What does the New Testament say? *Peter replied, Repent and be baptised, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins. And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit (Acts 2:38).* There was no shortage of water for such a large number of people as there were several pools in the city used for Jewish purification rites and less frequently for the baptisms of Gentiles converting to the Jewish

faith. In Acts 8:38-39 there is an account of Philip who baptized the Ethiopian official, possibly the equivalent of the Chancellor of the Exchequer under Queen Candace. Luke states: *And he gave orders to stop the chariot. Then both Philip and the eunuch went down into the water and Philip baptised him.*³⁹ *When they came up out of the water, the Spirit of the Lord suddenly took Philip away, and the eunuch did not see him again, but went on his way rejoicing.* There are reports of whole households being baptized together, following their profession of faith. The example of the family of the Governor of Philippi prison is a good one. After the earthquake in Philippi which forced open various locked doors, that enabled prisoners to escape into the main public space in the prison from their cells, the Governor feared a mass escape which his outnumbered officers could not have handled. However, no-one had escaped. It led to Paul and Silas having an opportunity to share their faith and resulted in the Governor asking how a person became a Christian. *They replied, Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved— you and your household.*³² *Then they spoke the word of the Lord to him and to all the others in his house.*³³ *At that hour of the night the jailer took them and washed their wounds; then immediately he and all his family were baptised.*³⁴ *The jailer brought them into his house and set a meal before them; he was filled with joy because he had come to believe in God— he and his whole family* (Acts 16:31-34). New Testament baptism was believers' baptism and from the evidence before us was consistently practiced upon both Jewish and Gentile followers of Jesus.

3. How Should I be baptized?

The Didache, a manual of church practices in the late first or early second century AD, contains the following instructions: baptize in the Name of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit' in living (running) water. But if you have no living water, then baptize in other water; and if you are not able in cold (water) then in warm (water) But if you have neither (ie the water is insufficient for immersion), then pour water on the head three times in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. [J.B Lightfoot, *The Apostolic Fathers*, 1898, p.232]. The practice of John the Baptist and His disciples is given in John 3:22-23: *Now John also was baptising at Aenon near Salim, because there was plenty of water, and people were constantly coming to be baptized.* At the time of Jesus' baptism it states in Matthew 3:16: *As soon as Jesus was baptized, He went up out of the water.* In the Church of Scotland the sprinkling of infants began with John Knox who had observed this method of carrying out this ordinance in Geneva. Prior to that date the immersion of infants had been the usual practice of the Roman Catholic Church, like the Eastern Orthodox Churches to this day. The Greek word βαπτισω means 'to immerse' or 'to drench', with the idea of a complete covering by something; In the Roman world, in secular literature, this word was used, for example, in the context of a naval battle in which ships lost at sea were reported as having been baptized. Another report concerned a group of soldiers crossing a bridge which collapsed. Sadly some of them were drowned as they could not swim. Those that died were reported as having been baptized. Guidelines for the dyeing industry spoke of cloth being baptized, fully immersed in the colour dye. Romans 6:3-4 states: *Or don't you know that all of us who were baptised into Christ Jesus were baptised into His death?*⁴ *We were therefore buried with Him through baptism into death in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, we too may live a new life.* No-one can mistake the symbolism here of going under the water and rising again, shortly afterwards! as being an identification with Jesus in His death and bodily resurrection that first Easter. Colossians 2:12: *having been buried with Him in baptism and raised with Him through your faith in the power of God, who raised Him from the dead makes the same point.*

4. What does it mean personally to be baptized?

(a) **A Profession of Faith** (Romans 10:9-10) *That if you confess with your mouth, Jesus is Lord, and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved.¹⁰ For it is with your heart that you believe and are justified, and it is with your mouth that you confess and are saved.* It is a public declaration of our faith in Jesus Christ; it is an occasion to which family and friends may be invited to join the regular congregation to celebrate this special step in the life of a Christian. It may be a few words or much more, but the point is that someone states that they are unashamed to admit that Jesus is their Lord and Saviour and that they wish Him to be central to the lives of other people they know and love. These words were believed to have been used in baptismal services in the Early Church at the time Paul was writing this letter in the 50s AD. They would have been spoken by the church leader who was taking the service to the candidate(s), prior to their baptism. In the Early Church as well as today those being baptized often testified to their faith in Christ by word prior to the practice of this ordinance. After the first generation or two of Christians this oath of allegiance to Jesus was seen as a political act of treachery by the State as pagan Emperors demanded that all citizens annually declared: 'Caesar is Lord' in a public ceremony to swear their loyalty to the Government. Christians were seen as rebels and defiant even traitors and various draconian punishments were introduced to bring them into line (unsuccessfully). Usually the time of their baptism was the first occasion they spoke in public in church. This was done to protect new converts in times of persecution as they may not have expected that declaring their faith in Christ could cost them their liberty or even their life. However, after a period of preparation classes they were admitted to the membership of the church following baptism. We are privileged to worship in freedom, but many of our brothers and sisters in Christ in other countries face the same risks and pressures as in the first centuries of the Christian Church.

(b) **A Step of Obedience** *Jesus replied, If anyone loves Me, he will obey My teaching. My Father will love him, and We will come to him and make our home with him* (John 14:23). I have already mentioned the Great Commission of Jesus, but the general point is made in these words of Jesus at the Last Supper with His closest disciples prior to His crucifixion. Many of us at some time or other have been 'in love' with someone. You would not need reminding that there are things that we would do not because the law of the land required them, but simply because we loved this other person and wanted to please them by our words or our actions. It may have been a small or a large thing but the motivation was the same –one of love. Our desire to honour the Lord should be primarily a response of love to the One who first loved us, rather than a cold mental acknowledgement that we ought to do certain things because we are followers of Jesus. Love for the other will cause us to initiate acts of kindness. The word for Christian love in the New Testament, *αγαπε*, describes words or acts of kindness; practical service for the good of others; putting ourselves out for those in need; thinking of others ahead of ourselves; this love will be modelled privately 'behind the scenes' rather than trumpeted to the world like a celebrity giving a press conference! John in his first letter talks at some length about this kind of love to his fellow Christians: *Dear friends, let us love one another, for love comes from God. Everyone who loves has been born of God and knows God.⁸ Whoever does not love does not know God, because God is love.⁹ This is how God showed his love among us: He sent his one and only Son into the world that we might live through him.¹⁰ This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins.¹¹ Dear friends, since God so loved us, we also ought to love one another.¹² No-one has ever seen God; but if we love one another, God lives in us and his love is made complete in us* (I John 4:7-12). May He help us all model this kind of love, as I know happens regularly in this church!

(c) **A Symbol of Consecration** (Romans 6:3-4) *Or don't you know that all of us who were baptised into Christ Jesus were baptised into His death?⁴ We were therefore buried with Him*

through baptism into death in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, we too may live a new life. This powerful image speaks of total commitment without reservation. It describes a faith journey without looking back or going back. It speaks of a dedication from now until eternity when the Lord calls us home. It echoes the words of Jesus to the suffering Church at Smyrna in Revelation 2:7 where our Lord told that congregation: *Be faithful, even to the point of death, and I will give you the crown of Life.* These words are all the more powerful because we know He ‘walked the walked’ all the way to the cross and beyond. Luke 9:51 stated: *As the time approached for him to be taken up to heaven, Jesus resolutely set out for Jerusalem.* Even in the Garden of Gethsemane at His time of anguish, knowing what lay before Him, Jesus modelled before His disciples total dedication to the pathway His Father had planned for Him. Luke 22: 39-46 records: *Jesus went out as usual to the Mount of Olives, and His disciples followed him. ⁴⁰ On reaching the place, He said to them, Pray that you will not fall into temptation. ⁴¹ He withdrew about a stone's throw beyond them, knelt down and prayed, ⁴² Father, if you are willing, take this cup from Me; yet not My will, but Yours be done. ⁴³ An angel from heaven appeared to Him and strengthened Him. ⁴⁴ And being in anguish, He prayed more earnestly, and His sweat was like drops of blood falling to the ground. ⁴⁵ When He rose from prayer and went back to the disciples, He found them asleep, exhausted from sorrow. ⁴⁶ Why are you sleeping? He asked them. Get up and pray so that you will not fall into temptation.* We will never follow God’s way as perfectly as Jesus did, but will you and me endeavour, through the enabling power of the Holy Spirit, to give our very best for Him? Paul as an older man from prison wrote these passionate words about His life’s work: *We proclaim Him, admonishing and teaching everyone with all wisdom, so that we may present everyone perfect in Christ.²⁹ To this end I labour, struggling with all His energy, which so powerfully works in me* (Colossians 1:28-29). (Paul uses the same imagery in I Timothy 4:10: *for this we labour and strive;* in I Corinthians 9:24-27 he suggests that a Christian will be as dedicated to serving Christ as an Olympic athlete to their preparations for the games. Yet it is not just our efforts Colossians 1:28-29 reminds us that although we do our very best it is the enabling power of the Holy Spirit within us that enables us to be victorious in Christian service.

5. What does it mean to the Church?

(a) **A Sign of Fellowship** (Acts 2:41) Baptism like the continuing ordinance Communion is not a personal sacrament, rather it is communal carried out in the context of the witness of the local church. Although baptism is an amazing blessing to the individual it is also a great encouragement to other members of Christ’s Church. It is a public act of witness which the candidate shares with their Christian family as an exhibition of their oneness in Christ, symbolising the oneness of that believer with the whole worldwide Christian Church, a body represented by the local expression of Christ’s Church. From its earliest days in Jerusalem Acts 2:41 stated: *Those who accepted his [Peter’s] message were baptized, and about three thousand were added to their number that day.* In consenting to the baptism of a candidate a local church is declaring that as far as they can tell this person is a genuine believer and has shown evidence of God at work in their lives. As a result they wish to celebrate with them the blessings of their baptism and pray for the special anointing of the Holy Spirit upon that person who is taking this step of faith. Following that action this Christian is formally welcomed into the membership of that congregation either at that service or soon afterwards at a communion service.

(b) **The Sign of admission to the Church** *And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved* (Acts 2:47) Believers’ baptism was the New Testament means of admission to the Church which we follow today in line with the earliest Christian practice. Baptism is a

command of Scripture. Have you taken this step of obedience? Jesus showed by His example and the Early Church by their practice the importance of this act. It is also a wonderful means of blessing both to the individual and the representatives of Christ's Church who share the occasion with the one being baptized. May all of us not only know Jesus, but also desire to give Him the very of our lives, for the rest of our lives, for His names' sake, Amen.