



**Baptism of Christ, Year C – January 10, 2010**  
Luke 3:15-17, 21-22

***A homily preached by the Rev'd James J. Popham***

Today we recall the Baptism of Jesus by John the Baptist. We also heard about the Baptism of the Samaritans by Peter and John. The first in the name of Jesus was with water. The second was by the Holy Spirit in the laying on of hands.

We can see in these different forms of Baptism the evolution of the church's understanding and practice of Baptism. Obviously, when John the Baptist baptized Jesus, Baptism could not have been considered a form of initiation into the church. There was no church. Indeed, Jesus had yet to begin his earthly ministry.

Nonetheless, the rite of baptism did begin to take hold among the early followers of Jesus, as is exemplified in today's reading from Acts. Though even then, the physical sign was the laying on of hands and involved no use of water. And the purpose was the reception of the Holy Spirit. We might also note that the sending of Peter and John to Samaria by the apostles in Jerusalem also suggests the development of the church as an institution with something of an organizational chart or at least some emergent lines of authority.

By the end of the first century, a document now considered the first catechism of the church, the *Didache*, prescribed a rite of Baptism involving triple immersion or affusion with water, signifying baptism in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Anointing and laying on of hands also were required parts of the ritual, as was extensive preparation of the candidates. And, in the process, baptism became what it is today, a sacramental rite, that is, an outward sign of grace conferred, that, among other things, admits a candidate to the Christian Church. And, again, we see in documents like the *Didache* an institutional imperative for uniformity in the understanding and practice of baptism. And we see the flowering of Christianity as an organized religion.

So this morning, when Julia is baptized, she will become a full-fledged, certified member of the Christian Church, a member of the Anglican Church, and a member of Christ Church.

And she will become part of something that is a great put-off in our post-modern culture ... organized religion. Perhaps, we should appreciate the implicit compliment – that we are at least ... organized.

Still, organized – or even disorganized – religion seems to have a bad name. And sadly, most of us could rattle off any number of reasons why the general public takes an increasingly dim view of so-called organized religion. Ask any teen or twenty or thirty something why they not only prefer reading the Globe and Mail at Starbucks or jogging along the Elbow on Sunday morning, but also actively resist coming to church. Self-righteousness. Killing in the

name of God. Internecine squabbling. Hypocrisy And the all-time favorite – irrelevance.

The most disheartening aspect of the post-modern suspicion of organized religion is the fact that it too readily neglects and obscures what is beneficial about religion and, moreover, why religion is not only relevant, but also essential – perhaps even to our very survival.

So what can we say about organized religion. It has been integral to human life on earth for at least 50,000 years. Some even go so far as to say that religion has been essential to the survival of humankind. And this carries the implication that our minds are hard-wired to believe in God and join in organized religion or even that a genetic disposition to religion has evolved in a process called “group selection” that mirrors the individual process of “natural selection.” In essence, this theory postulates that cultures which embrace religion survive and with them their genetic traits. Thus, religion is not something imposed on us for the benefit of secular rulers, but something instinctive and natural to humanity.

Therefore, organized religion must be doing something right. It must confer unique benefits on society that support the survival, even the flourishing of life on earth. Let us consider just a few contributions organized religion confers on the world, contributions even a devout atheist could not deny:

- Religion connects and unites people, even where there is no bond of kinship, ethnicity, language, or geographical proximity. It creates communities of trust and mutual support, which rise to the occasion most visibly when individual calamity or widespread catastrophe strikes.
- Religion also molds and shapes the fabric of social life. It is the basic source of moral rules that define proper social behavior and forms the basis for collective action for the common good.
- Religion inspires the creation and spread of beauty in the arts – and an appreciation of the natural beauty of God’s creation.

One might quite rationally ask, what could be more relevant to how we live our lives or treat our neighbors and the environment? We cannot deny the flaws and failures of organized religion, but not without recognizing the rightness and necessity of organized religion – or of our own Christian Church in all its variations – as a vital institution in our lives, our society, and our world.

This is why we celebrate Baptism. And why we take it so seriously. It is the initiation into something inherently and profoundly good: The Christian Church, the beacon of Christ in a world challenged by forces of darkness. The Anglican Communion, which finds unity across barriers of language, national borders, and ethnicity. And Christ Church, which epitomizes the community of trust and mutual support that commends organized religion to society. This is why we will pray for Julia, applaud Julia, and hand her a candle lit by the flame of the Paschal Candle, the light of the risen Christ to the world.

And in joining with us as we spread that sacred light to the world, she will be joining us in conveying what is good and right in how we love each other and how we love the world. And God's kingdom will be a step closer to reality in the world.

Amen.

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