

Baptism of the Lord

09.01.2022
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Introduction

How easy do you find it to be a peacemaker? In this passage of the Baptism of Jesus, we wrestle with the image of Jesus separating the good from the bad: those who follow Christ and work towards peace from those who do not. We look at the symbolism of the dove- that of peace, that of atonement, and of being set-apart for the work of Christ. The imagery of unquenchable fire is used- strong language that expresses both the consequences of not following Christ in doing the work of peace and justice, and the challenge of doing just that.

Text

Luke 3:15-17, 21-22

As the people were filled with expectation, and all were questioning in their hearts concerning John, whether he might be the Messiah, John answered all of them by saying, "I baptize you with water; but one who is more powerful than I is coming; I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. His winnowing fork is in his hand, to clear his threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire...."

Now when all the people were baptized, and when Jesus also had been baptized and was praying, the heaven was opened, and the Holy Spirit descended upon him in bodily form like a dove. And a voice came from heaven, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased."

Comment

Picture the scene for a moment. As Jesus rises from the baptismal water of the River Jordan, a dove descends to rest upon him. God the Holy Spirit as a dove. God the Father speaking 'You are my Son'. God the Son rising up from the water. Father, Son and Holy Spirit. In Biblical times the dove was a well-known symbol of peace, sacrifice and atonement, and in Luke's gospel reading we see the Holy Spirit in the

form of a dove. John the Baptist tells us that Jesus will baptise with both the Holy Spirit and with fire – known for its ferocity and power. And in this is the tension: peace, atonement and fire. How do they live together? What roles do atonement and fire play in the pursuit of peace?

Earlier in this chapter, John the Baptist has told his listeners not to rely on their ancestry – their line of birth. He warns the crowd that any power that may come from the family line will not be of use in the Kingdom of God. Here, John the Baptist expands on this. He uses an image that would have been very familiar to the listener:

‘His winnowing fork is in his hand, to clear his threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire.’

The winnowing process separates the valuable from the worthless. The chaff – the husk around the grain – must be removed in order to harvest the wheat. John is challenging his listeners to be worthy in their own right, for the chaff is of no value and will be burnt with unquenchable fire.

The illustration is of Jesus separating the good from the bad: those who follow Christ in peacemaking, and those who don't; those who seek to live a life of honour and self-sacrifice, and those who don't. It is an image of passing justice. In being a peacemaker, Jesus is tasked with calling out the injustice. Jesus seeks peace not by ignoring the wrong around him, but by addressing it. By taking a stand.

Peacemakers have a unique calling – to promote peace and reconciliation while at the same time calling out injustice and inequality. To be active in moving towards a situation that might, for a time, become messy and chaotic, as layers of misunderstanding, prejudice, discrimination and the dynamics of power become unravelled.

The dove is not only a symbol of peace, but also of atonement. At baptism we receive the forgiveness of Christ. In ancient times, the dove was used as a sacrifice in seeking to become right with God. All of us, at times, are guilty of wrong-doing and unhealthy thoughts. Of not treating one another with respect and dignity. Of not challenging the injustice we witness around us. Of not standing up for the rights of those weaker than ourselves.

Archbishop Desmond Tutu famously said: ‘If you are neutral in situations of injustice, you have chosen the side of the oppressor. If an elephant has its foot on the tail of a mouse, and you say that you are neutral, the mouse will not appreciate your neutrality’.

For us to move towards peace, there needs to be a process within ourselves of stepping back and examining our own lives. Of considering our inner being, before stepping towards the one with whom we are at odds, or towards the injustice that we witness around us. This stepping back gives a space for reflection and consideration as to how we approach the other. In baptism we do just this: we consider our life before, we seek atonement for our wrong, and we commit to walk in the way of Christ. Baptism is a time of self-reflection before a new life begins.

This self-reflection is critical in our ongoing work of peace. In seeking justice, we need first to consider our own inadequacies, our own failings and the impact of these on others. To turn away from the wrong we have committed. To seek atonement. All are welcome and invited, through baptism, to follow Christ. To

commit to the way of becoming a peacemaker. Baptism ‘symbolises a powerful moment of transition, of turning away from evil and towards God, trusting in Jesus Christ in the power of the Spirit. For an adult this will consciously be a moment of choosing to repent (turn again) and move to a new state of life’.*

The dove is a powerful symbol of peace and penitence. The peacemaker seeks to be right with God – to look for the fire their own life, the areas which turn a blind eye to injustice that will treat another with indifference or prejudice. Fire is important in showing us our own failings, in order that we might turn again and again to our God, and so turn towards a place of reconciliation and peace.

In baptism we are set apart for Christ – to follow the lead of Jesus in pursuit of peace. The dove that brought back the olive branch to Noah, a sign that the flood waters were receding, is still a symbol of peace today. The phrase ‘to offer the olive branch’ is used today when we seek to move towards another in reconciliation. The dove, representing peace and atonement, looks towards the fire of injustice in the work of Christ.

**All This For You, The Meaning of Baptism in the Methodist Church (Methodist Publishing, 2004).*

Response

In 1984 Bob Geldof saw the plight of those suffering from famine in Ethiopia. He acted, and the consequent single, ‘Do they know it’s Christmas?’ sold 3 million copies in the first 5 weeks of its release. It is particularly poignant at this time of year, when we have just remembered the birth of Christ, and is a song that is still played today.

We are not all called to this ‘big’ stuff. We are all called to be the peace of Christ where we are today – in the conversations we have, in our relationships, in our work, in our play.

You are invited to find a quiet place to be still for a while.

What is the injustice you face today?

What is the injustice you see others around you face today?

What will be your role today in seeking peace and justice?

Prayer

The quiet whisper of injustice that goes unheard
Let me be still to hear this voice
The roar of the powerful that fills the sky
Let me find the space between

The place where I am called to speak
The space where I am called to be

As the dove rests upon my shoulder
As I look inwards and then out
Let me find my voice
And the fire within
To speak out against injustice

To strive to be a peacemaker
At one with my Lord
At one with myself
At one with the world.

Amen