

The baptismal community of Christ is **not to allow the world's fears and prejudice (and its penchant for ostracising discomfoting minorities) to shape us**. The secular society is not permitted to dictate how we value (or more often devalue!) certain types and groups of people. In Christ the noisy infant is as valuable as a Bishop, and an ex-prostitute as precious as a Sunday School teacher with 50 years of faithful service.

For this reason **I prefer Christian names** to be used in the life of the church. This is not because we should all gush around, pretending to be good mates in a religious club, but rather, our baptismal names signify the only essential status we have in the community of Christ.

I rejoice when 4 year old Laban calls me Mark, and I hope 98 year old Fred Hosking rejoices when I use the precious name he was given at his baptism. I thank God for the gifts and the influence of outstanding Uniting Church people like Professor David de Kretser, Companion of The Order of Australia and serving Governor of Victoria, but I rejoice even more that among his home congregation of God's people at St James Wattle Park, he is just David.

Today then, we remember the baptism of the young man from Nazareth. We treasure his readiness to be numbered with us. We rejoice that the Spirit alighted on him like a dove, affirming the decision of the beloved Son of God to stand among tax-gatherers and sinners in those baptismal waters.

We rejoice also that we here are indeed a baptised people; Not clones, but a diverse motley mob who are (unnaturally) one in Christ Jesus; an odd people, rejecting the world's classism, racism, sexism, elitism; and sectarianism; an uncomfortable people, faithfully wrestling with issues we would have much preferred to avoid. A new race, drawn from the highways and byways of life to find ourselves face to face. A surprising community, treasuring one another in a fellowship that no social engineer could ever devise. Right?

'For as many of you who were baptised into Christ have put on Christ like a garment.' Galatians 3: 27

Amen!! Thanks be to God!!

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A Message from Mark! **His Baptism & Ours**

10 January 2010 - Baptism of Jesus
Scripture: Luke 3: 15-17, 21-22

Luke 3: 21-22 When all the people had been baptised, and Jesus followed, the heavens were opened and the Holy Spirit descended on him in bodily form, like a dove. A voice came from heaven "You are my much loved son, I am most pleased with you".

Galatians 3: 26-27 Through faith, in Christ Jesus you are all children of God. For as many of you who were baptised into Christ have, like a garment, put on Christ.

My theme today will be Baptism. Over the years there have been many parents who have approached me saying they wanted "*their baby done.*" Well, borrowing their phrase, we celebrate today that Jesus "*was done*" by John the Baptist in the waters of the Jordan river.

But first I want to start with one person's 'tongue in the cheek' definition of purgatory. *Purgatory for me would be that I was one of twelve human clones sitting round a table sharing bread and wine.* A horrible thought, isn't it? Twelve copies. Everyone exactly the same. No diversity.

My friends, I reckon there's no fear of that kind of purgatory for the people of this church. **We're certainly not a saccharine fellowship of clones.** We're not look alike, think alike, worship alike, pray alike, serve alike. Which means, that being members of the church runs contrary to our natural inclinations. **In fact, it's some sort of miracle that we're together.**

The church does not select members like Rotary, Lions, or the Melbourne Club. We don't select members because they fit in well together, or because we think they have something to offer us. We're not people of like worldly status, interests, priorities or financial clout.

Think **how much easier it would be to accept** and work with, fellowship with, and worship with **people of like mind**. It would take little effort, leave feathers unruffled and make for short efficient harmonious committee meetings. (Now, for a moment I'm tempted!) How **much harder it is**, and at times it feels almost impossible, to accept, worship and work with a **hotch-potch of such divergent personalities** and convictions.

Have you noticed how **we tend to respond to the image of ourselves in others**; a bit like seeing our own reflection in another's eyes and saying: Yes! The people we readily like to have around are quite literally our kind of people. It would be like having sweet communion with..... ourselves? Yuk!

Sadly, there are some people who split off from the church because they can't find this likeness in other church members. They hive off and try to form a fellowship of pseudo clones. A 'sweet communion' of people with similar convictions and prejudices.

That is not what God in Christ Jesus asks of us. It's not how the church is formed. **God in Christ asks us to seek and accept the differences, to embrace the otherness of others** --- especially the bits that prickle, bruise or frighten us. God chooses us, we do not choose God. In Christ we're called from separateness and cosy relationships **into 'sweet-sour communion'**. The one thing that links us together is Christ.

Which brings me **back to baptism**. I'm not concerned with the outward signs, like how much water, dipping or pouring, child or adult. I want rather to look at some aspects of **Christ's baptism and ours**. Among the crowds that responded to Baptist John's call for repentance and baptism was **Jesus of Nazareth**. **Why did he do it?** Whatever possible repentance did this unique Child of God need to make? None, presumably!

Why then? **Because God was calling him to identify with others; to stand with them; to be numbered with tax-gatherers and sinners**. Jesus was called to throw in his lot with those who shared his human nature, yet in the ways of sin, were so unlike him. It was an act of sweet-sour communion.

When St Paul talks about baptism, he says that it's an incorporation into the body of Christ. Or as in the Pauline text I have placed beside the story of Christ's baptism (*Galatians 3: 26-27*) ***'Through faith, in Christ Jesus you are all children of God. For as many of you who were baptised into Christ have put on Christ like a garment.'***

In our baptism, we who are unworthy of God, are placed in the new community of Christ Jesus which is counted as worthy (holy) because of his holy Presence. **All distinctions are annulled**. So Paul excitedly tells us that in Christ there is neither Jew nor Greek, slave or free person, male or female.

All the "otherness" for which we tend to bruise and isolate each other, no longer matters. **Race, gender and class, are dismantled by God**, declared illegitimate by Christ's baptism and ours. We're placed together in the one body in spite of our perceived differences. A part of the meaning of baptism is that in Christ we seek the "other", care for the "other", respect the "other", serve the "other," even though we may strongly disagree on all sorts of issues or find the other person not to our natural liking.

The church is not "natural" by this world's reckoning. It is a supra-natural fellowship. No wonder the early Christians were sometimes called a "second race" or a "new tribe."

We could rightly **add to Paul's words** by saying that **when we're baptised in Christ, there is no longer** --- married or single, Australian or Asian, clergy or laity, evangelical or high church, liberal or labour, theologically conservative or radical, young people or seniors, the clever or the ignorant, doctor or labourer, the clean or the unclean, social justice people or spiritual retreat people, life-long Christians or new converts, straight or gay people, orthodox or heretical, millionaire or pensioner, Pope or choir boy. That is **not** to say that we all must become alike, or sweetly agree on every topic. God forbid!

We **retain our differences**. And these differences can of course lead us into stringent debate on awkward issues, and may cause considerable stress and pain. Witness the travail and the haemorrhaging of members experienced in parts of the Uniting Church over homosexuality in the past decade. At times we might feel confused and threatened by our differences, but these differences are all subservient to the Spirit of Christ.

Nor should we ignore the fact that **we've been given different gifts**. The New Testament takes very seriously both the diversity of our gifts, varieties of ministry, along with our common value in Christ. Of course we have different abilities and opportunities, but none are classier than others!

We must equally be honoured and at times humbled, equally confronted and challenged, equally heard and questioned, equally hugged or have our personal space respected.