

The Sacramental Significance of Christian Baptism.

TIME has dealt hardly with the Gospel Sacrament of Baptism. Its importance in the fellowship-life of the Church has been minimised by the loose manner of its use, especially among those who practise paedobaptism. Whereas in time past the baptism of an infant was carefully guarded by an investigated and avowed Christian parenthood, nowadays even that barrier has broken down, and children are presented at the font by those whose only other attendances in the House of God are demanded by the social exigencies of a wedding or a funeral—or another christening.

It is to be admitted that this state of affairs is generally deplored by the more serious-minded within the Church, and there is much searching of heart in many quarters concerning this obvious deterioration of observance. Why, it is enquired, should not Baptism have an equal place in the life of the Church with the Communion of the Lord's Supper? It is difficult to assign the reasons for Baptism becoming secondary and casual; but the factual evidence that it has become so is indisputable. The balance of our Lord's twofold commission is thus disturbed, and the Christian witness to the world suffers accordingly.

It is possible that we have forgotten in these latter days the original intention of our Lord in providing for the sacramental life of His Church. Dr. J. K. Mozley, in *The Gospel Sacraments*, p. 29, gives us a clear definition of what he understands as the Christian doctrine of the sacraments. "The Christian doctrine of the sacraments," he writes, "refers the efficacy of these rites to the will of God who makes them channels of His grace to *those who approach them in the spirit of repentance and faith, that is with the true moral dispositions.*" (The italics are mine.) We are indebted to Dr. Mozley for that very clear and definite statement. It is unfortunate, however, that in a later portion of the book, when he discusses the sacraments in detail, he appears to have forgotten his own primary thesis. Of Baptism he says: "In the first birth there is a sharing of sin; in the second birth, a sharing of the forgiveness of sin. An adult who comes to baptism may be conscious of this profound contrast between the pre- and the post-baptismal state, as was Cyprian in the famous passage in which he put his own experience on record. But the contrast is there for everyone, adult or infant, who passes through

the baptismal water. It is the passage from the realm of nature to the realm of grace. And in the realm of grace, the first of all necessary blessings is the blessing of the forgiveness of sin. Wherever there is repentance and faith, there is God's answer in the forgiveness of sin. In the case of the infant, those necessary conditions are supplied by sponsors who should be regarded, not simply as the representatives of the infant, but as representatives of the whole Church, praying in its name that he who is to be made a member of the family may receive those blessings without which there can be no family at all." Thus, it would appear, is the Gospel Sacrament of Baptism reduced, on the one part, to being sorry by proxy, and, on the other part, to the expression of a pious hope, which, unfortunately, is not always realised. Is not the weakness of the present position regarding Christian Baptism just here: a confusion of thought as to what is efficacious Baptism "in the spirit of repentance and faith," and the Solemn Dedication of an infant within the family of the Church of God?

If, so far as is humanly possible, we can divest our minds of preconceived notions and traditional ideas of Christian Baptism, and approach the subject from the point of view of pure investigation in the light of our knowledge of the working of the human consciousness, we may get a new understanding of a question which is vital, and therefore fundamental, to the Christian Faith. The material at our disposal is so voluminous that we are apt to answer the question before it is put, and to decide the issue before it is tried. If, however, without looking for any particular interpretation, we discover one which is adequate in the light of present-day knowledge in other fields, we shall surely hap upon a hidden treasure. It is in this spirit of detachment that we should approach the sources of our subject in the consciousness of Jesus and the development of the experience of the Church.

We are justified in rejecting as unsound in these days of newer light on the inner working of the human mind, the separating of a specific subject from the full impact of the whole personality in the source. Looking at the historical Jesus as we know Him through the portraiture of the New Testament, we fail to give full value to the reality of the Incarnation unless we accept all the implications of His human personality. Jesus was a child of the race, as we are children of the race. He bore within Himself the essential nature of man and was heir to the accumulated resources of His heredity. He was an agent of expression, qualifying His surroundings, and an absorber of environmental conditions, influenced by the times in which He lived. Jesus was approached by and sought to approach the men and women amid whom He laboured by the same powers with which we ourselves establish our social contacts. There is nothing miraculous in the

way in which Jesus invited men to follow Him, or in His pungent criticism of the follies and prejudices of Scribe and Pharisee. The characteristic most prominent in the social life of Jesus is naturalness.

The average reader of the Gospels is impressed by the words of Jesus. Even though he may not be able to recall the exact words after he has laid down the book, the content has been presented to him in an unforgettable way. The words of a man always make an impression on the mental periphera. Whether the words are written or spoken, it is what we write or say that is generally remembered. But no one to-day would assert that the words of Jesus are more important than His actions. The Moral Analects of Confucius are, at least, on a similar plane to the recorded sayings of Jesus. Also, we would not care to admit that what Jesus said is the sufficient foundation for belief. Intellectual apprehension of truth is not salvation. Words, even in poetry, are liable to become entangled in the barbed wire of our defences on the circumference of the mind. A codified statement of truth is not sufficient to reach the mainspring of human personality. The will is not often touched by argument. You may convince a man, but the will to believe lies deeper than intellectual conviction. The conscious mind only is touched by verbal teaching. Thus, from the point of view of effective operation on the inner man, we place the parables in the lowest position. We rarely hear of any one being converted by a parable, and probably the men who became Christian through reading, such as the Ethiopian Eunuch and Tatian, would have been the first to ascribe their conversion to deeper causes. As Mr. Thouless says in his *Psychology of Religion*, "Purely intellectual conviction of the existence of God means very little until it has become associated with feelings and experience. The mere proof of the existence of a supreme being would lead us little farther towards a religion than the proof of the existence of finite numbers. A man with a religion of purely rational type would be in a worse position than the devils who, St. James tells us, 'believe and tremble.' We would remain in a condition of profound indifference." We may say, then, that the religion of Jesus, as we discover it in the Gospels, is not merely a religion of words. Pure intellectualism on the one hand, or arid sentimentalism on the other, are extremes He avoided. The religion of Jesus is neither a book of Euclid nor a poem.

Because Jesus was subject to the laws of our human consciousness quite naturally He was affected by processes other than the purely intellectual. Because He was above the laws of human consciousness He founded the Faith on something more enduring than a creed. He knew that a confession of faith tends to become a confession of failure. A creed becomes not merely outgrown;

no creed ever exactly fitted. A chemical formula does not describe a flower. The spectrum does not explain the sun. There are thoughts that lie too deep for tears, and, what is more, too deep for words. In nothing have we gone so far astray as in our trust in the efficacy of an adequate vocabulary. We have ignored the elemental man who resides in each of us behind the more or less rigid screen of evolved civilisation. Directed thinking which employs mostly words is a recent product of the life of civilised man. What about the barbarian behind the prison bars of our convention? Jesus reached the centre of personality by the method of symbolism. He broke through the crust of intellectual apprehension and probed deeply into the affective region of experience.

Thus when we come to the institution of Christian Baptism we are in the world of affective symbolism. It conveys a grace which escapes the definition of words. The truth of Baptism cannot be contained in a formula. There is no rational connection between water and the entrance of a human soul into the Kingdom of God, any more than there is a connection between spittle and speech or clay and the restoration of sight. If we attempt to justify Baptism on rational grounds, we confuse the categories. If we rely merely on the argument of blind obedience to command, surely we are asking too much of those whom we desire to influence for the Christian Faith.

If it is ceded that the symbolic is the only way of reaching the affective region of the mind, there still remains the all-important question as to how a symbolic act may become a sacrament. All symbols are not sacraments. Can we safely assert that all sacraments are symbols? I do not think we can be satisfied with the somewhat crude explanation of the Anglican Catechism. A sacrament is something more than an outward and visible sign of an inward and spiritual grace. If it is not more than this, there is a danger lest it degenerate into something less. Perhaps we may accept it as a God-used method of producing an adequate affect in the human soul (using the word "affect" in the psychological sense of an organised system of emotional dispositions).¹ Even here we must be careful of ignoring the volition of the individual and assuming that the affect can be produced without, or in opposition to, the will. That an affect may be produced without, or despite, our will is evident every time we are moved emotionally by music or poetry or visible grandeur; but the affect may be as evanescent as it is momentarily moving. We must distinguish between an affect and an adequate affect. Thus, when Jesus was intent on producing an adequate affect, He made it a condition of fulfilment that the object of His sympathy should have faith. In

¹ See McDougall's *Social Psychology*, Chap. VI, p. 137.

almost every case of the conveyance of His healing power, the comment was, "Thy faith hath made thee whole." In the sacrament of Baptism repentance is added to faith. Baptism thus becomes a channel of the grace of God "to those who approach (the sacrament) in the spirit of repentance and faith, that is with the true moral disposition" (Dr. J. K. Mozley).

In the light of this we can the more readily grasp the meaning of Paul's words to the Roman Church: "Are ye ignorant that all who were baptised into Jesus Christ were baptised into His death? We were buried therefore with Him through baptism unto death: that like as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, so also we might walk in newness of life." One meaning is on the surface of this passage: the experience of Jesus passes through Baptism into the life of the baptised. This transference creates identity between Christ and the believer. The two elements of an effectual sacrament—grace and fellowship—are thus clearly emphasised by the Apostle. Other references to Baptism in the writings of Paul bear out the main idea contained in this passage. He writes to the Corinthians (1 Cor. i. 12-17) that he is glad that he baptised none save a few—Crispus, Gaius, and the household of Stephanus. This is not a depreciation of Baptism, but rather a protest against the tendency of certain members of the Church at Corinth to transfer their fealty to persons lower than Christ, or to make Christ one among many others from whom grace could proceed. It was a warning against incipient sacerdotalism of the hierarchic type. Again, in 1 Cor. vi. 11, Paul emphasises the threefold nature of Baptism: "Ye were washed, ye were sanctified, ye were justified." The reference appears to be (1) to the outer symbol, (2) to the accession of grace, (3) to the accomplishment of identification through fellowship. In another place Baptism is compared with the cloud that overshadowed and protected ancient Israel (1 Cor. x. 1, 2) and with the sea that separated in order to allow them to escape from the Egyptians (1 Cor. x. 2). In these similes Paul depicts the symbols of God's presence with His people. In the same letter (1 Cor. xii. 13) the corporate significance of Christian Baptism is stressed, while in 1 Cor. xv. 29, the unity of the Church, both militant and triumphant, is the theme. To the Ephesians he writes: "Christ also loved the church, and gave Himself up for it; that He might sanctify it, having cleansed it by the washing of water with the word, that He might present the church to Himself a glorious church. . . ." (Eph. v. 25-27.) The fullest meaning is given to Baptism by uniting the whole personality in the symbol and the word, the symbol reaching the lower levels of the unconscious and the word having impact with the conscious, the two combined thus supplying the need of the whole personality.

After the letters of Paul it is to the Acts of the Apostles we look for a record of the development of the doctrine of Christian Baptism in the early Church. There is a reference to the Baptism of the Holy Spirit in Acts i. 5, but in Acts ii. 38-41 we find Peter urging upon his auditors the necessity of repentance and Baptism in the Name of Jesus unto the remission of sins. In this we see that grace is not an imposition from without upon an involuntary subject, but the volitional reception of power through fellowship. In Acts viii. 16, 17 there is the account of the Christian Faith bursting the chrysalis of Judaism, and of Gentiles receiving grace. There is an important passage in Acts xix. where the baptism of John is compared in result with the Baptism of the Christian Church. The content of the symbol is different in the two cases. Jesus has filled the ancient form with His own new life.

In the Gospel of John we have the latest interpretation of the sacrament. Perhaps, too, we have also in this Gospel the clearest insight into the inner meaning and message. In the conversation of Jesus with Nicodemus we have described "the conditions of admission to the kingdom, both symbolically with reference to the outward element employed . . . and spiritually with reference to the Divine agency of which Baptism was the pledge." (*Century Bible*.) When the disciples came to Jesus with questions about the baptism of John there is the unfolding of the purpose of the Master, and the clear announcement that John's baptism was but the preparation for the greater and more powerful one of the Kingdom.

Returning to the letters of the New Testament, we find that the writer of 1 Peter uses Baptism as a comparison when he illustrates his point by reference to the safety attained by Noah and his family by passing through the water in the Ark. The writer of the letter to the Hebrews also makes mention of the symbol of water, and refers to its spiritual content in hearts cleansed from evil.

In the earliest documents we read of men and women coming to the baptismal waters, not merely in obedience to a blind command or even in accordance with an ancient custom, but in a realisation of the reception of grace and the completion of fellowship through the act itself. The basic facts of human personality are accepted long before they are understood, and the men and women of the early Church had no such intellectual equipment as would cause them to doubt what their hearts endorsed. In our more critical age we are apt to doubt first and accept afterwards. The less sophisticated intuitively grasp what they cannot always explain. No amount of rationalisation will do away with man's fundamental make-up. There are factors in man which are not

cognisable by the intellectual faculties, which defy analysis. It is not the faith which satisfies even the intelligence for which the world is waiting: it is the faith which will meet the needs of men. We may say with Pascal: "The heart has its reasons which the reason does not know." A clearer emphasis of the function of Baptism in the life of the Church will restore this oft-times neglected and misused sacrament to its full value, and make it once more worthy to be placed alongside its Gospel counterpart, the Communion of the Lord's Supper.

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