

## JOHN 3:22-36

Pausing only to notice that according to the next chapter, Jesus never baptised anyone and to wonder why not, we are going to think about purity. John is not always the clearest of gospel writers and this passage in our second reading does not make it clear what the discussion between the Jew and John's followers was about. The start of the story is a comment or a complaint by someone that everyone was going to Jesus rather than to John and the implicit point seems to be that Jesus is offering a better class of baptism. People are emerging more spiritually pure from the baptism that Jesus' disciples are offering than those who go to John.

Whatever they were expecting John to reply, what he said was that it was only to be expected and they were obviously not listening when he said that he was preparing the way for the one who was coming after. He, John, is in the position of the friend of the bridegroom who rejoices when he sees the bridegroom coming.

Now, we know from the book of the Revelation of John that the coming of the kingdom of God, what is otherwise known as the Escaton or the end of the world, is foreshadowed by Jesus coming down from heaven meeting with his bride, the church. How do we know who are members of the church? Well, it's the baptised, those who have been initiated into the faith and this is what John the Baptist goes on to explain in the last paragraph: a believer, an initiate of the church is someone who says God is true and whoever believes in Jesus has eternal life. This is one of the reasons that the two foundational sacraments are baptism and the eucharist. The other five, marriage, ordination, confirmation, anointing the sick and reconciliation, are not universal, all may, some should, none must. But baptism and accepting the truth of the eucharist, those are at the root of faith.

Purity is quite a complicated business. A lot of it is to do with culture and the norms of whatever society we are brought up in. Purity issues go very deep indeed: it's not just Jews in the bible who have purity issues. Let's start with easy examples. Scrambled egg on my breakfast plate is pure. Scrambled egg on my shirt front is not. A stranger coming up to you and putting something in your mouth is impure but not if it is a dentist or indeed a priest with a wafer. We all contain seven pints or so of blood, but if it escapes and drips on our clothes or on the ground it's impure. If it's menstrual blood it's very impure and cannot ever be seen by anyone else. In fact all body fluids are impure, pretty much. Saliva in our mouths is OK, spit is not. Urine is definitely not. Semen is impure, even though it makes babies. Even saying some of these words in church is making you feel uneasy. What do we do with these difficulties? Quite often we ritualize them. We surround them with words and actions that makes them pure. We also wash, if we come into contact with impurity. If I spend the morning gardening, I wash my hands to remove the earth. My hands are literally but also figuratively dirty. When nurses clean people who have been sick or change their dressings, they wear special clothes that not only keep them clean, but also mark them out as having an exemption from the purity issues that make the rest of us go ugh and look for someone else to clean up the mess. One of the issues around the ordination of women is about purity. The line of priests in apostolic succession is pure if it is kept to men. Does it become impure if women are permitted?

There are purity issues in baptism too. Where else would a parent give their baby to a stranger and allow the stranger to hold the child, tip it towards a basin of water and pour water on it's head? This is an act of ritual cleansing, of washing away sins. Sins are not visible of course. I am reminded of a joke I once played on two children I was bathing one of whom had chicken pox. I said there was a risk that the spots would come off in the bathwater and float away to attach to the other child. She shrieked, rose vertically out of the bath and I had terrible trouble persuading her it wasn't true. Chicken pox is very impure. Baptism remains a ritual even if the candidate (Latin word *candidatus*, wearer of a white robe in Roman elections, symbolising purity) is fully immersed in a bath or a river. It's not about being physically clean.

In the next chapter of John's gospel, Jesus meets with the woman at the well. This is a very significant story, because Jesus is talking with a woman, who is impure. She is doubly impure because she is a Samaritan and Jesus asks her for a cup of water. His acceptance from her of this gift makes him impure and part of this story is an illustration of what God does and does not find. It's a pointer to gentiles becoming Christians, including the oppressors of the Jews, the Romans, when for pious Jews even entering their houses was an act of impurity. Eventually the Apostle Peter will stand on the roof of a Roman's house and hear God say to him, "what God has declared clean, let no man declare unclean."

Back to the beginning. Why doesn't Jesus baptise? When I started this sermon I did not know the answer and I may not have it right at all. It might be that Jesus did not baptise because if he had, it might result in different classes of Christians, ones baptised by Jesus and lesser mortals baptised by John the Baptist or one of the disciples. I think the answer may be more profound than that. I am not sure that Jesus could baptise. He could not, because baptism is a sacrament and Jesus cannot carry out a sacrament because he is a sacrament. When he institutes the eucharist he is not being symbolic, he is saying "this is my body, this is my blood" and if you have any belief at all in the real presence, Jesus' presence in the bread and the wine we use every Sunday, then I'm not sure it's possible to be a sacrament and to carry one out. I'll take on board any arguments to the contrary.

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