



Sermon preached by Revd Nigel Uden on 23rd March 2025

Readings: *Psalm 63.1-8; I Corinthians 10.1-13*

Lent III

To begin, I invite you to pray with me again the Ash Wednesday collect.

Almighty and everlasting God, you despise nothing you have made and forgive the sins of all who are penitent. Create and make in us new and contrite hearts. Give us grace worthily to lament our sins and acknowledge our brokenness, that we may receive from you, the God of all mercy, perfect remission and forgiveness; through Christ our Lord. ¹

Lent is an opportunity to launder our lives. In a congregation I served many years ago, there was a gentleman named Terry. He was a fine elder, and touchingly, though not uncritically, supportive of much that I tried to offer. But Terry wasn't a sinner. He used to say to me, 'why do we have to have a prayer of confession in every service? I can't think of anything this week that needs to be forgiven.' We agreed to differ, and at least to recognise that there may be *some* present who thought they needed to confess— be they minor peccadilloes, or the more serious crimes for which I used to visit some of that congregation in jail. Francois Spufford summed up this sinfulness to which most of us know we are prone, in his now famous aphorism about 'the human propensity to mess things up' – HPTfU, as he put it. ²

When St Paul writes to the church in Corinth, he is well aware of their shortcomings, just as are they of his. Apart from anything, they are cliquey, a tad less respectful in worship than he would like, and not always as theologically astute as he wished. In particular, they meddle in idolatry, the worship of other gods just in case Jesus isn't enough, which is an absolute no no. Paul harks back to Old Testament times and recalls how ill-disciplined the people were after their release from Egypt. One might have thought the Exodus would have left them grateful and ready to have a new start and live an upright life, but their wanderings in the Wilderness seem to have had quite the opposite effect – they are tempted into sexual immorality, putting God to the test, constant complaining, and a whole lot more.

Paul makes a complex comparison between the people's experience at the Red Sea and Baptism, implying that both should have led the people to live righteously. Now, that's a slightly odd link, because to say that the way we are dipped into water at Baptism is like the Israelites being dipped into the Red Sea just doesn't make sense. At the Exodus, they *weren't* dipped into the Red Sea: it parted, so that they could be brought safely through it. ³ So, here we need to give Paul's language here careful attention. What we actually heard him say was that the Israelites were baptised 'into Moses'. Perhaps he is not using a watery analogy so much as suggesting that they were baptised into Moses' *leadership*, just as the Christian is baptised into Christ's leadership, so that the baptised Christian's life is really about faithful followership. Remember, 'seeing Simon and Andrew, Jesus said, 'Follow me.'" ⁴ The comparison he really seems to be making is more likely to be that the Israelites made the mistake of thinking that being so intimately engaged with Moses somehow protected them from falling into sin, and from being judged for it, too. In the same way, Paul admonishes the Corinthians that they are at risk of thinking their Baptism and indeed their regular taking of communion magically protect them from any further errors, for which they must take responsibility. It's as if they think that they are all like my sinless friend, Terry.

In very truth, I doubt that many, if any of you are Terrys. I am quite sure that there isn't one on the church role because I have checked. Indeed, I expect we all look at our lives through quite varied lenses, and will assess our sinfulness differently, but I would be surprised if any of us feel we never need to say sorry for something – be it what we have done and shouldn't have, or what we haven't done

¹ Panel on Worship of the Church of Scotland 1994 *Book of Common Order of the Church of Scotland* Edinburgh: St Andrew Press page 660

² Spufford, Francis 2012 *Unapologetic: why despite everything, Christianity can still make surprising emotional sense* London: Faber & Faber page 27

³ Exodus 14.21f

⁴ Matthew 3.18f; Mark 1.16f

and should have. But I must speak only for myself. I am well aware of the need for some Lenten laundering in my life. I am grateful this penitential season exists, and, confident that ‘God despises nothing God has made and forgives the sins of all who are penitent’. And that’s why I am ready to examine myself. *You* don’t need to know what I confess, nor do I need to know what *you* confess. But I do urge a mutual recognition that it is the right thing to do - confessing anything that separates us from God and from one another. Being baptised doesn’t so transform us that we never mess up again. No, Baptism is not about perfection ... it’s about pardon.

Indeed, one of the things that a committed Christian might ponder in their Lenten laundry is just how much difference does being baptised into the leadership of Christ really make in the way we live. As a member of another church I once served said, ‘What you need to realise, Nigel, is that I am a very different person on Monday in the factory than I am on Sunday in the sanctuary’. Clearly Baptism made little difference to his working life.

A Pope once visited the Catholic Church in France, which is one of the oldest in the world. Apparently, in his homily, he asked, ‘eldest daughter of the Church, what have you done with your Baptism?’⁵ Such might we ask ourselves: what have we done with our Baptism? You see, if in Baptism we are immersed into Christ, a new life offered to us as Christ lives in us, how does that shape us as individuals, at home, at work, on the roads, here in Church? What’s the credibility of our Christlikeness?

- Is there always grace in the way we relate to others, or only when we think others are listening?
- Is there a sensitive awareness of the stresses people are coping with in today’s world, or are we still expecting people to have as much time to volunteer as they used to have when a secretary did the correspondence, and an administrator did the filing that is now down to the computer-bound e-mail-obsessed executive?
- Is there a commitment in our prayerfulness – even when we are not longing for God as ‘the hart desireth the waterbrooks?’⁶
- Is there a passion in the way we oppose injustice, or, as one American Pastor has it, do ‘we make our peace with sin; ... and fall for lies that cater to our prejudices?’⁷
- Is there a generosity in our giving, which takes seriously, even if not literally, the model of tithing?
- Is there an authenticity in our readiness to forgive others, even as we are forgiven?

Moreover, if doing our Lenten laundry in our personal discipleship is important, how about if that Pope walked through the door and said to this afternoon’s Church Meeting, ‘what have you done, Downing Place Church, with your Baptism?’ Does the agenda reflect a community bent on pursuing the mission of Christ in Cambridge, in the same way that Jesus’ baptism catapulted him into his saving work on the streets of Galilee and on the cross of Calvary? Given that the Church no longer needs to be the source of people’s entertainment in the way it was a few generations ago, is there the need for *anything* on our agenda that isn’t a demonstration of what we are doing with our baptism?

A few minutes ago we sang to one another what we most need to hear as inspiration for being the Church:

*We share by water in [Christ’s] saving death.
Reborn, we share with him in Easter life
as living members of a living Christ.
The God of splendour clothes the Son with life.
The spirit’s fission shakes the church of God.
Baptised, we live with God the Three in One. Alleluia!
A new creation comes to life and grows
as Christ’s new body takes on flesh and blood.
The universe restored and whole will sing: Alleluia!*⁸

⁵ Pope John Paul II 1982, Paris

⁶ Psalm 42.1

⁷ Thorne, Leo S. ed 1983 *Prayers from Riverside* New York: The Pilgrim Press page 126

⁸ from the hymn, *We know that Christ is raised and dies no more*, by John Brownlow Geyer 1932-2020 CH4 635.2-4

So, we might ask, 'Nigel Philip – insert your own name - Downing Place Church, what have you done with your Baptism?' Deeply encouraged that God is faithful, despising nothing God has made, and forgives the sins of all who are penitent, let's get on with the laundry, and live for Christ, because, just as Lent is nothing without Easter, so our Lenten penitence is pointlessly nothing without an Easter life.

Let it be so, and thanks be to God. Amen

N. P. Uden

23rd March 2025