

BAPTISM – 13th January 2019

There was a man who worked for the Post Office whose job it was to process letters that had illegible or unusable addresses and he got a lot of them in the run up to Christmas each year.

As he sorted through the pile, mostly addressed to Santa, he came across a letter written in shaky, spidery writing addressed to God. Intrigued he opened the letter and this is what he read:-

Dear God,

Last week I lost my purse with £100 in it. I am a widow on a small pension and I was just about to go out and buy food so as I could invite 2 recently bereaved friends to Christmas lunch.

Can you please help me as I would like to help them.

Sincerely,

Edna.

The postal worker was touched, and showed the letter to his colleagues in the sorting office, and being Christmas, the season of goodwill and all that, they all contributed a few pounds each to help Edna.

When they counted what had been given it came to a generous £96, so with a warm glow at having helped a poor widow treat her friends, they arranged for an envelope with the money to be dropped into her house by her postman.

A few days after Christmas came another letter in the same spidery handwriting addressed to God. All the workers gathered around to read her reply.

Dear God,

How can I ever thank you for what you did for me. Because of your gift I was able to have a lovely Christmas dinner for my friends. By the way, there was £4 missing. It was probably those thieves who work in the Post Office!

She thought there was something missing.

And that is also the case in today's epistle.

A severe persecution of the church had broken out in Jerusalem and the Christians had to flee to neighbouring countries for safety. Philip, one of the church's deacons fled to Samaria.

Now Jews and Samaritans hadn't got on with one another for hundreds of years. In fact, it was worse, they wouldn't have anything to do with each other. Jews even took a lengthy detour to avoid having to cross Samaria on their way to Jerusalem. They were both from the same stock of Abraham, but the Jerusalem Jews accused them of diluting the faith and intermarrying with locals when the Jerusalemites were taken captive in Babylon 400 years previously. And the dispute had festered ever since, getting worse instead of better.

That was the context in which Philip preached about Jesus. And he must have been a persuasive preacher in spite of his Jerusalem Jewish identity, for we read that crowds turned out to listen to him and many turned to Christ and became Christians.

And Philip then baptised them – as was and is the norm.

But there seemed to be something missing. Although they had been baptised, St Luke says, they hadn't received the Holy Spirit, and they had to wait for Peter and John to come down from Jerusalem to lay hands on them, and when they did, we read "they received the Holy Spirit."

Now this has puzzled students of the Bible for years. Why, in this one instance only, did the Holy Spirit seem to be missing from baptism? Were the Samaritans some kind of second-class Christians, not the real thing in the eyes of the church?

And many commentators have come to the conclusion that Luke describes their baptism as deficient to prove the very opposite – that by Peter and John, leaders of the church in Jerusalem, coming to Samaria to lay hands on the Christians there, it was to show that the Samaritans were being accepted as equals by the mother church, and as proof of this they received the Holy Spirit like everyone else who had been baptised.

Like with Edna and the post office, there was, in fact, nothing missing in the Samaritans' baptism. But that needed to be shown by the laying on of hands by the apostles.

And so baptism has come down to us as the way in which we enter the Christian church. It is a complete act and nothing is missing.

One of the summaries of faith used by the church says this about baptism:-

"In Baptism, God called me to himself and I was made a member of Christ, the child of God and an inheritor of the kingdom of heaven."

There's nothing missing or deficient in that definition.

"God called me to himself". Before we could even understand or know God, he was reaching out to us in love. As soon as we were born we were objects of God's love and care, and this is dramatically re-enforced when we baptise infants.

God takes the initiative, and that call doesn't fade or lessen as the years go by. He doesn't take anything back.

And then that definition says that in baptism we are made members of Christ. And that's a very strong word, meaning not the membership of a club, but rather membership in the sense that my arm is a member of my body. As members of Christ, his life flows into us as the blood from our hearts flows into our limbs and organs. He becomes a living part of us – which is a good description of the Holy Spirit – the presence of the risen Christ within us to guide and strengthen us.

A member of Christ and **the** child of God.

Some of the most beautiful verses in the Bible come from the Book of Isaiah. In chapter 43 God says, "I have called you by name and you are mine. You are precious to me. Do not be afraid, I am with you." And later in Chapter 49 God says, "I have written your name on the palm of my hand." **The** child of God.

And that definition ended that by baptism we are "made inheritors of the kingdom of heaven." All the blessings of God are available to us – the forgiveness of sins, the promise of new life, God's help and presence, the assurance that life has meaning and purpose both for this life and the life of the world to come.

Yes, baptism is complete. There's nothing missing. All we need to live as Christians is bestowed on us at baptism. Baptism is the common link uniting all Christians and as we enter the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity, the message of the acceptance of the Samaritan Christians is a reminder to all denominations that what unites us is far greater than the ancient squabbles and arguments that have divided us.

There's nothing missing. In baptism we have all been called by God and been made members of Christ, children of God and inheritors of the kingdom of heaven.