

The Third Sunday in Lent

March 7, 2020 @ 8am & 10am

Trinity Church, Cranford

THE THEOLOGY OF BAPTISMAL FONTS

Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on us, sinners. Amen

The first time I visited Trinity Church I was struck by the beauty of the church and the feeling of warmth that emanated both from the people and the oak panelling. At the time I was more familiar with stone churches which are perhaps better at capturing some of the grandeur of God, but often come across as cold and impersonal. The liberal use of wood furnishing in Trinity really fosters an environment of intimacy.

In this thoughtfully planned building with its beautiful central Holy Table I was surprised not to see a prominent space devoted to the rite of initiation; the place of baptism. After looking more carefully I did see the stone font tucked off in the corner and hidden away under its' ornate lid.

Regardless of the reality, this arrangement of a prominent Holy Table and an 'out of the way' font, spoke to me of a community thoroughly formed and invested in the Eucharist, but with room to grow into the fullness of baptismal identity. Therefore, soon after arriving I began talking about the possibility of enhancing the place of initiation at Trinity, and the 150th Liturgical Committee has embraced that charge. During the Trinity forum today, that committee will present the work that has been done so far on creating a new space and font for baptisms here at Trinity.

My sermon today will be devoted to the theology of baptismal fonts and their placement in churches. I will be offering some broad liturgical principles that inform the placement and aesthetic of baptismal fonts. Obviously these broad principles will be applied uniquely in different churches and communities, and the Liturgical Sub-Committee on the font have had to apply these principles to our unique church building and community.

Although this sermon focuses on the baptismal font, it must be said emphatically that the container is not the primary symbol of baptism. When we baptize by affusion, it is water that is poured over the head of the candidate: without water there is no baptism.

In fact the *Didache* — an instructional guide to worship written around the same time as the Gospels — asserts that running water is to be preferred for baptism and only if no running water is available may water in a receptacle be used. The point of these directions is obviously to elevate the primary symbol of baptism: water and lots of it!

In the Early Church the place of initiation was in a separate room of the house of the church, and later, when the Church had buildings of its own, the baptistry was often a separate building altogether, thus symbolizing the significance of baptism as the first stage on the Christian journey.

Today, opinions among liturgical experts vary as to just how separate the baptistry should be, and this gives the local community a degree of freedom in developing its own particular response to this liturgical need. What everyone does agree on however, is the necessity for the place of initiation to be more than a font in the corner, but a place of permanent significance clearly demarcated from the rest of the area of liturgical assembly.

“One thing is certain,” says Giles Frazer, “the font should never be in the sanctuary. To place a font in the sanctuary, lined up with the ambo [*pulpit*] and altar on a kind of liturgical stage, deprives it of dignity and reduces it to a mere object among many, instead of the central feature in a distinct area of liturgical activity. Increased visibility for an assembly too lazy to move around is no excuse. Another certainty is that the font should be a permanent and fixed feature, neither wheeled out from a sacristy nor brushed under the carpet.”

The Font Committee wisely decided that the ideal place for the new font is in the centre isle of the Narthex and will require opening up the North side to mirror the open area on the south side at the ushers table. This central place will ensure that every time we enter the building we will be impelled to remember our common baptismal vocation. On a practical note the font will be able to move to allow a coffin past for a funeral, while a movable font it not ideal this seemed the best compromise to our committee, given the restrictions of the building footprint.

As to what a ‘proper font’ might look like, Regina Kuehn suggests that it has a twofold purpose: “First, it *reveals* by its shape part of the truth about baptism. Second, the font *points* to the water.” We are given a whole host of designs in the pattern book of the Early Church — cruciform, hexagonal, octagonal, fonts like graves and fonts like wombs. What matters is that we ‘follow the Spirit’s prompting’ to bring baptism to life in our own setting. The font committee was particularly drawn to the octagonal and womb-like font patterns and so I will give some of the theological background to the choice of these shapes.

The symbolism of 6 and 8 sided fonts cannot be obviously derived from scriptural passages but were developed by patristic writers, especially Ambrose and Augustine. Six is linked with the sixth day of the week, Good Friday, the day on which Christ died.

Therefore, the design of many chalices is based on the hexagon, the six-sided shape. It symbolizes that this chalice is no ordinary cup but rather the cup of the new and everlasting covenant, which Christ validated on the sixth day by shedding his blood.

If the number 6 represents the death of Christ on Friday, then the number 8 points to the eighth day, the day after the Saturday Sabbath: Sunday, the day of resurrection. Jewish tradition, by which early Christians lived, measured the week to mirror the creation story, beginning with Sunday, the first working day, and ending with the Saturday, the seventh day, the day of Sabbath rest. Christ's resurrection occurred on the day after the Sabbath and so did his appearances after the resurrection.

This is why the early church gathered on Sunday, a working day, to remember these events in celebration and to await the time when the Lord would again appear in their midst. This day's festive character was counter-cultural, a day beyond the known measure, beyond time, ushering in a new age. Augustine of Hippo wrote about this age in his magisterial work, *The City of God*:

And that seventh age will be our Sabbath,
a day that knows no evening
but is followed by the Day of the Lord,
an everlasting eighth day,
hallowed by the resurrection of Christ.

Now let us explore the richness of the baptismal font depicted as womb. The greatest agent of transformation is the womb; it changes the past into the future. Combining the two images, the water and the womb, a community makes a strong statement about the nature of baptism.

An ancient prayer attributed to Bishop Serapion expresses this transforming work of the womb-like water eloquently: “Take those who are to be born again and shape them after the pattern of your own divine beauty, the beauty no words can express. So filled with beauty, born anew, may they attain salvation and be considered worthy of a place in your kingdom.”

The font-as-womb conjures up many images that parallel the baptismal candidates experience, especially if baptized as an adult. The atmosphere surrounding natural child-birth describes exactly the mood and situation of the baptismal catechumens: patience, high expectations, familial intimacy, a one-time event, privileged time leaving a mark forever, supreme effort, communal joy and welcoming, immediate need for care and nurturing.

Allow me to conclude with the words ascribed to Sixtus III and inscribed on the Baptistry of the Lateran: “Here a people of godly race are born for heaven; the Spirit gives them life in the fertile waters. The Church-Mother, in these waves, bears her children like virginal fruit she has conceived by the Holy Spirit. Hope for the kingdom of heaven, you who are reborn in this spring, for those who are born but once have no share in the life of blessedness. Here is to be found the source of life, which washes the whole universe, which gushed from the wound of Christ.”

Amen.

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