

Sunday 5 May - Sixth Sunday of Easter

Sermon by Christine Newmarch

An audio recording of the sermon will be available after the service at [Sermons \(tk-tiptree-braxted-benefice.org.uk\)](http://Sermons(tk-tiptree-braxted-benefice.org.uk)

Our first reading, from the Acts of the Apostles is about baptism. It is just one account of a baptism taking place recorded in the New Testament.

Can you remember others?

We probably think of baptism of always taking place in much the same way in church today, but there is quite a lot of variation in the stories in the Bible. Let's think about Jesus 'baptism. What was that like, and are there differences between the four gospels?

What was happening before that?

There is an early reference to something like baptism in Ezekeil. The prophet wrote: I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you will be clean. I will cleanse you from all your impurities and from all your idols.

Many years later, John the Baptist was baptising people who came to him for spiritual cleansing. In the OT baptism was not a once in a lifetime event, but something which could be renewed, refreshed, just we make a fresh confession in this service each Sunday morning.

In last Sunday's reading, we heard about an Ethiopian official, the treasurer no less, who learnt, from the apostle Philip, about Jesus fulfilling the prophecies of Isaiah, and asked to be baptised straight away.

What happened then? Well, it seems it was very quick. There was no anointing, nor laying on of hands. Philip and the man simply went down into the water together. Philip baptised the man, and as Philip was snatched away by the Holy Spirit, the man went on his way rejoicing.

That's quite different from this morning's story. The lectionary only gives us part of the story. It took place at the house of Cornelius, a centurion of the Italian Cohort. He was a devout man, who had a vision instructing him to send a message to Simon Peter, who was at a different city, at Joppa, to ask him to come to his house to preach. Peter did so, and that's where today's reading begins.

How did this baptism differ from that of the Ethiopian man?

- It involves more than one person – all who heard the word were affected;
- The Jewish men who were with Peter understood that something special had happened;
- The people began speaking in tongues, as they received the Holy Spirit before they were baptised.

Remember at Jesus' baptism, the Spirit descended on him like a dove as he was coming up out of the water.

These baptism stories – the Ethiopian man, and the men at Cornelius' house - are about events which took place some while after Pentecost, but we are hearing them now to prepare us, to remind us of the power of the Holy Spirit, ahead of celebrating that pivotal event in two weeks' time.

These accounts are about inclusivity. The Ethiopian, and Cornelius and his household were Gentiles.

In the Great Commission, recorded in Matthew's gospel, Jesus told his disciples – and therefore us too – to go and make disciples of all nations, baptising them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.

That is what we do today in our baptism services, affirming our faith in the triune nature of God. The Great Commission means we must welcome all, but they must also be well prepared for the commitment they are taking upon themselves: to turn away from all that is evil, and to turn to Christ as their Lord and Saviour.

Philip had interpreted the Suffering Servant narrative in Isaiah showing how Jesus had fulfilled the prophesy.

Peter prepared Cornelius and all the people at his house for their baptism. He told them the whole story of Jesus' ministry, his passion, death and resurrection, and his command for his apostles to preach the forgiveness of sins in his name.

Our gospel reading this morning, reminds us of Jesus' overriding commandment that we should love one another as he has loved us.

Such love can only come from God, and if we keep his commandments, we live, dwell, abide in his love, and become his friends. It is God who chooses and invites, and it is for us to respond, whoever we are, accepting his gracious invitation. For as St Paul tells us, as many as are baptised into Christ, have put on Christ, clothed in his love.

So let us always be ready to respond to God's love, by loving others as he loves us.

Amen.