

There were four churches in a small country town: Presbyterian, Baptist, United, and Anglican. And all of them were completely overrun with squirrels.

- * The Presbyterian church, after much prayer, decided that the squirrels were predestined to be there and they shouldn't interfere with God's divine will.
- * In the Baptist church the squirrels had taken up habitation in the immersion tank, so the elders decided to put a cover on it, fill it up and drown them. But the squirrels escaped and the next week there were twice as many.
- * The United church decided that they were not in a position to harm any of God's creatures. So, they humanely trapped the squirrels and set them free a few miles outside of town. Three days later, the squirrels were all back.
- * The Anglicans had the best solution. They baptized all the squirrels and now they only see them at Christmas and Easter.

Two Sundays ago we celebrated the birth of a baby. Last Sunday we heard how people brought presents to the child, and today we heard of his baptism. The sequence is precisely what we expect in our tradition: baptism follows birth, usually by a few weeks, or perhaps a couple of months if the family is spread out. That's what we are used to.

But, of course, Jesus wasn't a baby any longer. Today's gospel had jumped ahead, about 30 years. And Jesus wasn't sprinkled with water; he was dunked in the river. Those are definitely not things we are used to. Many Christian groups, however, believe that baptism must meet both of those requirements: an adult and complete immersion. Some groups – mostly in warmer climates – insist that the baptismal immersion must be in a river. Other groups consider the river to be optional, and prefer a baptismal tank, especially those that are further north.

The Russian Orthodox Church also requires full immersion baptism, preferably soon after birth. Given where that church originated, river immersions, especially in winter, weren't a good idea, so every church has a large, ornate tub, big enough to completely immerse a child. At baptism, the child is stripped naked and dunked three times in the water.

2

Our Anglican tradition is for the baby to be brought to the church, as soon as it is feasible, with family and sponsors, to be sprinkled with consecrated water and prayed over. We are quite comfortable with symbolic baptism: we don't need a river, or full immersion in anything, and we generally consider it important to baptise a child reasonably promptly.

That last point used to be especially significant. Doctrine taught that only the baptised would be allowed to enter heaven, and infants who died before being baptised would be left in limbo for eternity. Trainee clergy used to be taught how to do "emergency baptisms", and for all I know they probably still are. If there is some doubt about whether a newborn will survive, and the parents believe they will not go to heaven without baptism, then it can be quickly arranged, using whatever is available. Most clergy, I suspect, might be itching to explain why such a belief is completely inconsistent with what Jesus taught us about a loving God, but that really would not be the right time to do that.

The symbolism of water as an agent of renewal goes back to the dawn of history. In Old Testament narratives, crossing water often symbolized a significant change in a person's status or condition. The people who crossed the Red Sea with Moses, for example, were slaves on one side but free people when they stepped up on the other side.

Water was always of great significance in Hebrew culture. Purification rituals were compulsory, for people, food and cooking pots, and they involved a lot of water. It's easy to see why insisting on the importance of cleanliness and washing made the Hebrews unique in the ancient world, and at the same time why it gave them a survival advantage over other groups.

It's also easy to see why water was imbued with great significance – all life does depend on it after all. As for its power to transform a person, before we start to feel too superior about their lack of sophistication, just think how it feels sometimes to have a nice hot shower.

In the past, our predecessors took it for granted that baptisms, weddings and funerals had to take place in a church, even if you never went to church any other time. These days, weddings and even funerals can and do happen anywhere and everywhere, and baptisms are a thing of the past, except for sincere church-goers and those people who want to keep Grandma or Great Auntie Maud happy.

And that's not an entirely bad thing. There is no legal dimension to baptisms, like there is to weddings: it is a purely a sacrament of the church, and if the ritual is meaningless to the people involved, it's a waste of time, isn't it? Well, sometimes it is. But sometimes, the act of keeping Great Auntie Maud happy by baptising the baby, can bring other members of the family to a revival of their own faith.

I don't imagine any of us remember our own baptism, because we were most likely all baptised as infants. Our experience of baptism is purely that of watching other people—usually babies—being baptized. We don't expect to see great lights, or mysterious birds, or to hear distant and awesome voices, but we do regard the ritual as significant, or we wouldn't bother doing it. Even so, most of us probably haven't given much thought to how we understand the meaning of baptism.

John the Baptist dunked people in the river to signify that they were washing away their old lives and beginning a new life of faith. He called people to “repent”, which means “turn around”, or “face in the right direction.” Matthew puts his account of the baptism of Jesus right before he dedicates the rest of his life to ministry and teaching. For the rest of us, the bar is a little lower: our baptism signifies the beginning of our lives of faith.

When we marry in the church, we exchange vows to one another, before God, and we exchange rings that serve as visible signs to the world that we have committed ourselves to another person. When we baptise babies, we make promises to God that we will be responsible for seeing that they are brought up to be people of faith. And we mark them with the sign of the cross.

We mark the baptized with an invisible sign. It signifies the beginning of a relationship with God which is not visible to the human eye. A relationship that transcends human awareness. A relationship that, like all relationships, needs to be nurtured and nourished and maintained. Just as wearing the wedding ring does not constitute a marriage, being marked with the invisible sign of the cross in baptism is only the beginning of something that needs to be worked on.

AMEN.