

## His Baptism and His Blood

### III - How can water work such great things?

What Holy Scripture teaches about Baptism is often misunderstood and misrepresented, not only by those who reject it, but also by those who claim to believe it, and even, in some measure, by those who try to be obedient to the Word of God with regards to Baptism.

The most common misunderstanding is probably that which sees a contradiction between Baptism on the one hand, and faith on the other. Most of those who reject what Holy Scripture teaches about Baptism claim that they believe in salvation *by faith* in Jesus, as opposed to Lutherans who believe in salvation *by Baptism*. On the other hand, many Lutherans, at least unconsciously, operate with the notion that faith is the only path to salvation for adults, whereas little children are saved *without* faith, by virtue of Baptism, until they grow up; then Baptism no longer applies to them, and they have to accept Jesus and begin to believe in Him.

For in many ways, from what Holy Scripture teaches about Baptism, and what the faithful Church of Christ therefore also teaches, the question presents itself, does it not, which also our Catechism asks: *How can water work such great things?*

For although *Baptism is not just plain water*, as our Catechism says it because Holy Scripture teaches it, water is nevertheless necessarily involved, or Baptism would not be the *washing of water with the Word*, as Holy Scripture says that it is; and so, one must arrive at the conclusion at which our Catechism also arrives, that Baptism is *the water included in God's command and combined with God's Word*. Now, this is difficult for most of us to deal with. Somehow most of us are uncomfortable with relating the realities of God with those of this world, and the things in it. And the most natural reaction for us is to either disregard that which is spiritual, or to disregard that which is in this world, and takes place in this world.

To separate that which God has joined together is nothing new to sinful nature. We found several examples of this in what we heard tonight, of the Passion of our Lord Jesus Christ.

We heard about the Jews who, as we heard it, *did not enter the governor's headquarters, so that they would not be defiled, but could eat the Passover*. Entering the house of a heathen came with the risk of coming into contact with something unclean.

And if they were to come into contact with something unclean, they would become unclean themselves, for a while, and unable to take part in the sacred rite of the Passover meal. Now, this makes perfect sense, does it not? Except that they were actually at that very moment engaged in the most grave evil of all against God Himself, having the Son of God slain, who is God Himself, and, in addition, doing so by underhandedness and dishonesty. In other words, they thought that they could remain clean before God by merely going through the motions, or rather, by *not* going through the motions of entering the governor's house; and they imagined that their outright evil and ungodliness would not affect their standing with God!

This is not without similarity to those who seek assurance of their good standing with God in the fact that they were once baptised, although they will otherwise have nothing to do with Him; nor without similarity to those who demand the benefits of church membership, such as having their weddings done, or being admitted to the Sacrament, although they reject the Word of God and the faith.

We hear also of Herod tonight, who had but little interest in our Lord Jesus except to seek excitement and entertainment from Him. Again, not without similarity to those who do not respect that the worship services of the Church, such as funerals and weddings, are exactly that, worship services, and want to use them instead as a mere frame for merely cultural purposes, and often even insist that the Church abandon and deny her faith at such services and introduce readings or songs that do not honour God or proclaim the faith, and perhaps even outright deny the faith.

And then there is Pilate. Not only did he try to weasel his way out of having to make a decision about Jesus and leave it to Herod to pull the chestnuts out of the fire; he had actually given up altogether on what is true and good. *What is truth?*, he asked, only to walk away without waiting for an answer.

Answers come with commitment, when it comes to the Truth, with responsibilities and accountability; no doubt that is why so many who ask questions are terrified of answers. They declare themselves *spiritual*, but they will not commit to anything other than their own whims and wishes. They claim to be *too* spiritual to submit to any one religion, and so they will not submit, either, to that which is of the Spirit, that is: the Christian faith. And, again, they might nevertheless claim Baptism and church membership for comfort, just to be on the safe side.

Again, though, *Baptism is not just plain water, but it is the water included in God's command and combined with God's Word; which means that Baptism does not stand alone, isolated from the faith, as a mere outward act. Or as our Catechism answers the question as to how water can work such great things as Holy Scripture says that it does: Certainly not just water, but the Word of God in and with the water does these things along with the faith which trusts this Word of God in the water.*

Faith and Baptism are not to be separated, nor can Baptism be separated from the Word of God, or from the faith, or from what our Lord Jesus has suffered for the salvation of sinners. *For without God's Word the water is plain water, as our Catechism says it, and no Baptism.* And the implication of this is obvious: those who reject God and the faith will have no benefit of their Baptism; rather, on the contrary, as the Letter to the Hebrews writes it: *Much more punishment will be deserved by the one who has spurned the Son of God, and has profaned the blood of the covenant by which he was sanctified, and has outraged the Spirit of grace!*

Baptism has its place in the plan and purpose of God for the salvation of sinners; separated from it, Baptism is useless and outright offensive to God.

Baptism relates to the Son of God who had Himself baptised into the sin of sinners unto death in order that sinners might be baptised into His holiness and righteousness for eternal life.

We hear it tonight, how the Jews explained to Pilate why they brought the matter of our Lord Jesus to him in the first place, the first time Pilate tried to weasel his way out: *It is not lawful for us to put anyone to death!* Now, with this they were not referring the Law of God, but rather to Roman law, which prohibited anybody other than the authorities acknowledged by Rome to issue a sentence of death. And Holy Scripture also informs us that *this was to fulfil the word that Jesus had spoken to show by what kind of death He was to die.*

The Son of God was to die upon a cross, according to Roman practice; for thus it was to be fulfilled, as it was written in the Law: *Cursed is He who is hanged upon a tree.* As the holy Apostle Paul writes it: *Christ redeemed us from the curse of the Law by becoming a curse for us—for it is written: "Cursed is everyone who is hanged on a tree".*

The Son of God was to die upon a cross, cursed and condemned by God for the sin of sinners, which He had taken upon Himself in His Baptism, so as to make it to be His own rather than ours, and thus to take it away from us.

And in His suffering He would pay the price and penalty for all sin before God, in full, and in abundance, so as to make us righteous and right with God, free from all sin and guilt and impurity; so far did His righteousness outweigh our sin, His goodness our evil. And therefore He would be raised from death. And now that He is in glory with God, He gives His righteousness to us sinners to count as our own before His judgement and make us righteous and right with Him, and pure and perfect. This is the promise He gives to sinners in Baptism, and with His promise, what He promises is actually given to us, for He is God, and His promise cannot but be true, being that it is *His* promise.

This is why, as our Catechism says it, with the Word of God the water is a *Baptism, that is, a life-giving water, rich in grace, and a washing of the new birth in the Holy Spirit, as Saint Paul says in Titus, chapter three: "He saved us through the washing of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit, whom He poured out on us generously through Jesus Christ our Saviour, so that, having been justified by His grace, we might become heirs having the hope of eternal life."*

In our Baptism God declares us to be one with Him who made Himself one with us in His Baptism; and so we are that, and must be, since *He* says so. And cleansed from all evil and impurity before Him we are born anew as children of God, heirs to His heavenly Kingdom and His eternal life. More than that, with His promise of eternal life, He breathes His own life into us, that is: His Holy Spirit, so that His life lives in us, and we come alive to Him and begin to believe in Him, and begin to love Him, and live in His love.

To separate Baptism from the Word of God, or from the faith, or from our Lord Jesus, or to set them against each other, that is to separate what God has joined together. For *Baptism is the water included in God's command and combined with God's Word.*

This still leaves the question, though, does it not: *Why does water come into it at all?* Well, Baptism with water teaches us that our salvation is from God. It is not found in our own feelings of spirituality, or our own judgements as to how to be righteous and right with Him. It is *He* that works it, and gives it to us, with His Word, according to His ordinance. And it is given to us with His Word in outward means, so that anyone who seeks salvation in Him may *know* that His promise applies to *me*, and has been applied to *me*, as His gift, according to His ordinance.

O Christ our God, Lamb of God, who have borne, and take away, the sin of the world, have mercy upon us. *Amen.*