

## Message for Trinity Sunday 2020

As you walk into our church in Petworth, you come into this tall entrance room, and on the right are the big double doors that obviously lead you into the body of the church. But in front of you is this other, smaller door. To those of us with an inquisitive mind a closed door immediately makes us ask: now what is through there?

The answer is that it leads us into this rather splendid self-contained space, a space that is bigger and brighter than that entry porch, a space that is almost like a miniature church in itself. The door has led us into the baptistry, the space within the church that is set apart for one very particular purpose: this is the place where people come to be born again into everlasting life, to be joined with Christ in such a way that he becomes always and for ever a part of who they are. This is an event so momentous and so extraordinary, that we set apart a special place for it, a place that at first seems quite simple and plain but which in fact is full of rich symbolism. That door through which we enter the baptistry is a door into another world: a door into a world rich in meaning, a world where everyone of us lives, now, as an adopted child of God. I would like to explore this space with you so that we can discover just what this stone and wood and glass are saying to us about living as a child of God.

I suppose you might wonder why I am bringing you here today, on Trinity Sunday. Well the Trinity, this unique mystery whereby God is three persons but one God, enfolds us in communal life, in life lived in relationship with others. At every celebration of Mass we begin by calling on the Trinity: 'In the name of The Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit' and we end with the priest blessing us, again, in the name of the Trinity. We are wrapped up in the Trinity. It is the same with our Christian life: this life in relationship with God begins when we are baptised, here, 'in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit'; and perhaps the last words we ever here as we lie on our deathbed will be the priest saying 'Go forth, Christian soul, from this world in the name of God the almighty Father, who created you, in the name of Jesus Christ, Son of the living God, who suffered for you, in the name of the Holy Spirit, who was poured out upon you...'. Mass is wrapped up in the community life of the Trinity, but so is the whole Christian life: and it all begins here, at the font.

The font is the object in the baptistry where we should begin: there could be no baptistry without one, and it is the focal point, the solid stone block that confronts us and grabs our attention as we come in. Clearly this is something important, and something important obviously happens here. It is a solid presence covered in rich decoration, cut into this octagonal shape. Our font has eight sides: in fact in many older churches the baptistry itself is a separate building, the place where the new Christian is born to eternal life before being led in triumph into the church, and there the whole baptistry often was octagonal. This is not a coincidence. The early Church Fathers spoke about Christ rising from the dead on the eighth day. God created the world in six days; on the seventh day he rested; then comes something new, a new phase in creation, when God makes all things new. This is the eighth day. Eight sides on our font tells us that in baptism we are being dipped into the resurrection of Christ. We go down into the tomb, down into the water with him, so that we can burst triumphantly out again, shattering the surface of the water as Christ shattered the tomb on Easter Day. Just as an aside, I wonder how many people were saved from the flood in Noah's Ark? There's a bit of homework for you.

In fact, come to think of it, this baptistry itself has something of the feel of a tomb to it. You can imagine this being a burial place, perhaps with some great monument here to the deceased. In older churches to go into the baptistry you would often have to go down some steps, as if

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descending into a tomb. It is an enclosed space that wraps itself around us like a tomb. This is also a very deliberate part of its design. The baptistry is both womb and tomb. It is the place where we are buried beneath the waters so that we can rise again with Christ; it is also the place of rebirth, where people are born again (as Jesus explained it to Nicodemus) in the womb of the Church, born into the family of the children of God. When they leave the baptistry to enter the church as newly baptised Christians, they do so full of joy and surrounded by the saints who have become their brothers and sisters in the family of God. So off they go, the new Christian, into the church through these splendid gates. The gates, too, are not a coincidence. They also tell us something. Baptism marks for us the beginning of a journey that we hope will end in Heaven. We hope that the gates of Paradise will be flung open for us, just as this gate is opened to let the new Christian into the church. The Garden of Eden was barred to the fallen Adam and Eve; baptism unlocks the gates that were closed to them. As Psalm 99 says 'Enter his gates with thanksgiving, and his courts with praise!' Nothing here is a coincidence.

But we are not quite ready to leave the baptistry yet. When we go out into the nave of the church we will stand on a wooden floor, and above us will be a wooden roof. But in here things are different. The floor is tiled, and the roof is vaulted stone. This is exactly like the sanctuary of the church. There the roof is also vaulted stone, and the floor is tiled: tiled like this one, with these very beautiful decorative tiles that sparkle as they catch the light. It is a pretty effect, but it is more than that. The Book of Revelation tells us that the main street of the heavenly Jerusalem is paved with gold. Again, baptism takes us to another world, to the world of Heaven. The font and the altar. These two places are the heart of our building, the place of new birth and the place of daily encounter with Christ. To mark these places the builders of the church have spared no expense. Only the very finest materials will do.

Truly this magnificent space is a sermon in stone and wood. And in glass, too. Traditionally the baptistry always had an image of the Baptism of Christ in stained glass, as this one does, to take us in our minds to the river Jordan. Spiritually we stand beside the Jordan in line as the Lord sinks into the waters, the waters which are for ever blessed by having touched him. Above his head, of course, hovers the Holy Spirit in the form of a dove, just as the Holy Spirit hovered above the waters at the time of creation. And in case we miss this point, directly above our font is a stone ceiling boss of the dove of the Holy Spirit. He is present at every baptism here just as he was at the Lord's baptism.

There is so much more that could be said. The light floods in here in the evening because this baptistry is at the western end of the church, but it is also on the north side of the church. This is quite deliberate, because the north symbolises paganism and unbelief. This little cupboard in the wall of the baptistry contains the holy oils that will be used in baptism but also in confirmation, the oils blessed by the Bishop on whose authority these baptisms take place. On the wall this simple crucifix reminds us that the way to Heaven goes through the cross, not round it, and that the Devil will always be abroad to try and distract us from our journey into light and truth. The Easter candle, symbol of the risen Christ, from which every person baptised will be given a candle, reminds us that as disciples of his it is our great joy and our solemn duty to take the light and warmth of his love into all the world's coldest and darkest places. We will be accompanied of course by our guardian angel, and so that we do not forget this the angel appears in the glass too.

When we can open our churches again – please God let it be soon – why not visit and spend some time in here, time to be grateful for the great gift of baptism, the gift that puts our shattered lives together so that they make sense, so that we are part of a story that has meaning, and hope and challenge and wonder; and has a clear ending, the gates of glory, the streets of gold, eternal life.