

Dances, Kisses, Baptism and Communion

Mike Starkey, Holy Trinity Twickenham, 29/01/2006.

(Acts 16:11-15)

There are ways of communicating which are not through words. A dance is a different kind of communication from a maths textbook. The book tries to pin things down and be precise, but a dance affects you at a range of levels: your mind, your emotions, your senses, and so on. Or a kiss. A kiss can touch our hearts more than our heads. It communicates in a different way from words. The same is true of music.

God is a God who communicates. And he also uses a range of ways to communicate. Sometimes he pins things down. The moral guidelines of the 10 Commandments are fairly specific when they describe the kind of life God wants his people to lead. Sometimes things are a bit more vague: Jesus often talks in parables and stories, to get people thinking, to open up a range of possible meanings.

But there's another way God communicates with us today, which is not really based on words at all. And that's through what we call the sacraments. There are two sacraments that were given to us by Jesus himself: Baptism and Holy Communion.

Sacraments are God's way of speaking a different kind of language, one which affects us at a different level than our rational brains. And to do this God uses everyday aspects of the real world. Solid, tangible stuff. And he meets us in a special way through this stuff.

In Holy Communion the solid stuff God uses is food. We can't summarize the meaning of Communion in one short statement. It can't be reduced to that. It's about God meeting us, not just in our brain through rational propositions, but in our taste-buds and in our digestive system. Holy Communion's a kiss from God – you can examine it and dissect it all you like, and search out its meanings. But it remains a kiss, something physical which affects you emotionally and bodily, as well as rationally.

Another kiss from God is baptism, where he meets with us through plain old everyday water. Water it evokes so many things. I can think of at least 15 without trying too hard: water for cleaning and washing; refreshment; the waters of the great Flood; a ship launching out into the deep; dangerous seas; death by drowning; water of life; Jesus's baptism; the water which flowed from Jesus' side on the cross; launching out into uncharted waters; washing away something; the 'pouring out' of the Holy Spirit; the Spirit hovering over the waters at the Creation; Paul's statement that 'we all drink of one Spirit'; the breaking of waters at the birth of a child.

And so on. Which of these is the real meaning of baptism? Well, probably all of them and more. Baptism is about a drowning to an old life, it's about a cleansing and washing, it's about refreshing and new birth, it's about launching into new waters. And more. In the Bible some of these meanings are unpacked a bit for us, to get us thinking about how God can meet us in something as ordinary as water.

Now somebody might say: why do I need to bother with sacraments anyway? Can't I just have faith? That's like me saying: 'My wife knows I love her, so why do I need to give her a kiss?' It sort of misses the point.

A kiss expresses a relationship, and it helps build a relationship. Anybody who has to ask: 'Why should I kiss this person?' Is not so much wrong, as just rather sad.

Baptism is a kiss from God, which conjures up all kinds of meanings for us. But it can't be reduced to one single meaning. And God offers it to everybody: from the most mature adult down to the tiniest baby. The sacrament doesn't depend on us being able to reduce it to a single meaning, or even understand it with our minds.

And that's why it's great that here at Holy Trinity we have a wide range of ages of people being baptised, from small babies to old people. Anybody can receive a kiss, and everybody can know – in a way that's appropriate to them – that it expresses a wonderful mixture of affection and affirmation and love. It's a gift of God.

And my prayer is that each of these children being baptised will have received a kiss from God today. And that they'll be exploring the meaning of that kiss for the rest of their lives.