

## THE CONNECTIONS BETWEEN LENT, SATAN, AND BAPTISM

When we speak about “the sacrament”, we regularly mean the Lord’s Supper. In the early church “the sacrament” was more likely to mean baptism. Our baptisms last about fifteen minutes. When we have the first example of baptism after the time of the apostles (in Hippolytus, about 215 AD) it was a series of ceremonies lasting over several weeks. By the late middle ages these preliminary ceremonies were compressed into what was done at the church door before the parents and sponsors moved to the font.

By about the third century AD many candidates for baptism were enrolled during Lent about three weeks before Easter. The emphasis in preparation for baptism was on deliverance from Satan as much as on instruction. It was assumed that before baptism Satan controlled every pagan. We would want to distinguish between being under Satan’s power from being demon-possessed. It was also assumed that a series of actions had to disinfect the candidates from Satan to make them ready for baptism.

In his *Baptismal Booklet* Luther retained many of these ceremonies that prepared for baptism. Salt prevents food from decay, and salt was put on the candidates to symbolise freedom from the corruption of Satan. The sign of the cross was a sign that the devil feared. We still mark candidates for baptism with the sign of the cross. There were repeated exorcisms leading up to the day of Baptism, which usually happened early on Easter morning. A number of scrutinies were held, presumably to test the effect of the exorcisms. Closer to the day of baptism the Creed and the Lord’s Prayer were delivered to the candidates. It was held that the Creed was something to be kept as a secret, not to be disclosed to pagans. During times of persecution such things could easily be misconstrued. A short form of the three-part Creed was actually used in question form as the words used during the baptism itself. Before baptism both the one baptising and the candidate for baptism were instructed to fast. On the basis of a variant reading in the Gospels, Jesus told His disciples, after a certain exorcism, “This kind cannot be driven out by any means except by prayer” (Mark 9:29). The fact that some versions add “and fasting” illustrates the belief that fasting was also a means to drive away the devil, or may have been the basis for the practice.

On the morning before the baptism the candidates had another series of ceremonies. There was a solemn exorcism, a ceremony of “opening”. Originally it had had a different meaning. The mouths, nostrils, and ears of the candidates were anointed with olive oil after the exorcism, apparently to “seal out” Satan. Later the ceremony changed in meaning, on the analogy of Jesus’ healing of a deaf mute, when he said, “Ephphatha” (be opened). Then the candidates or their sponsors recited the Creed and the Lord’s Prayer. On the Saturday night before baptism there was a vigil, during which there were long readings from the Scriptures.

We still have in our baptism orders a renunciation of the Devil. Some Lutheran orders still use an exorcism. After the baptism there was an anointing by a presbyter, and, if the bishop was present, also an anointed with chrism. At Rome only the bishop did this last, and because the bishop could not always be present, it became separated from baptism. Because only the bishop could do it, it was regarded as more important, and it developed as a separate ceremony, using the marking of the forehead with chrism in the form of a cross, and was the origin of the custom of confirmation. In Roman teaching confirmation imparted the Holy Spirit for strength in the Christian life. It was accompanied by the laying on of hands by the bishop. This last illustrates a tendency for the various ceremonies to be regarded as separate rites distinct from baptism. The truth is that baptism itself delivers from the devil and bestows the Holy Spirit.

Immediately after Jesus was baptised at the Jordan by John the Baptist he was led into the wilderness for forty days to be tempted by the Devil. He fasted during this time. The analogy of forty days gives us our origin of the Lenten period of forty days, from Ash Wednesday to the Saturday before Easter. The Sundays are not counted as part of Lent. These three aspects together explain the origin of Lent.

There were some differences in the East. Candidates faced the west, the region of darkness, as they renounced the devil, and turned to the east, the region of light, as they declared that there were adherents of Christ. The East used a passive formula in baptism, not “I baptise you in the name of the Father and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit”, which in any case developed later in the Christian West, but “N is baptised”. In the East the presbyter completed the whole rite, including the sealing with chrism (called “chrismation”)

One interesting thing is that the New Testament nowhere says expressly that baptism delivers from the Devil. It is there by implication. Jesus told Nicodemus: “Unless anyone is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God” (J 3:5). It is also true that any unbeliever is in the kingdom of darkness. Jesus Christ “has rescued us from the authority of darkness and has transferred us into the kingdom of the Son” (Col 1:13). It was this Scriptural teaching as well as the liturgy of baptism that he had inherited that led Luther to say, in the Small Catechism, that baptism “delivers... from the devil.”

In those times people had greater use for symbolism than today. It is interesting that about the only ceremonies that modern people find meaningful to illustrate what God works through baptism are clothing of the person just baptised with a white baptismal garment, and the handing of a lit candle. Ancient people regularly used olive oil before and after a bath. Some scholars suspect that the use of olive oil alongside the water that is an essential part of baptism may have come from Gnostic influences.

The truth of the doctrine of original sin made people unwilling to wait until the next Easter for the baptism of their infants. Since they are “flesh born of flesh”, sinful human nature born of sinful human nature, they need to be born of the Spirit in baptism, the only means that is available to them. On the other hand, there is a profound connection between

baptism and the resurrection of Christ. We can understand the desire of people to be baptised particularly at Easter. Many of the baptismal passages in the New Testament also refer to Jesus' resurrection. Through baptism people are joined to Jesus Christ in His death, burial, and resurrection (R 6:3-10; Col 2:12; compare 1 P 3:21).

God works faith through baptism (G 3:26-27; Col 2:12; E 1:13). When Peter defended what he had done at the house of Cornelius, he said, "If God has given to them the same gift as He gave us too when we became believers in the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I that I could hinder God?" (Act 11:17). Believers look back to the day when they were baptised as the time when their new walk with God began (R 6:4). However, that was also the beginning of a life-long battle with Satan. Before that, people were in Satan's power. After that, there is an ongoing struggle.

The Gospel for Ash Wednesday includes Jesus' words about fasting (Mt 6:16-21). We regard the time of Lent as a time to contemplate Jesus' passion. Jesus' suffering, death, and resurrection constituted His victory over Satan. God "disarmed rulers and authorities and made a public show of them when He triumphed over them in Christ" (Col 2:15). In addition, the temptation of Jesus in the wilderness included Satan's suggestion that He did not have to die. He could have all the kingdoms of the world by worshipping him, instead. Jesus wrestled with this same temptation, that somehow His drinking of the bitter cup might be avoided, in the Garden of Gethsemane. His admonition to His disciples, "Be watchful and pray, that you may not enter into temptation. The spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak" (Mt 26:41) should be one that His disciples take seriously.

Personally I have distaste for Lenten sermons that warn us not to deny the Lord, as Peter did, or betray the Lord, as Judas did. They so easily turn to moralising, and away from Jesus Christ and what He has done by His passion. It is, in my view, much closer to what we should hear and reflect on during Lent if we ask, "What does it mean for us that the Son of God suffered and died?" This question confronts us directly with the meaning for us that Jesus Christ is both God and man in the same person, and that who He is and what He has done is the very essence of the Gospel. We go through Lent as those who have been baptised into His death, burial, and resurrection, and as those who need strength from Him to resist Satan's temptations. For, because of Christ, Satan cannot condemn us.