

Did you ever know?
Romans 6:3-11

The Revised English Bible translation of the New Testament reading says: "Have you forgotten that when we were baptised into union with Christ we were baptised into his death?" For Paul's Roman readers, it might have been something they had forgotten, but for most people today, it isn't something forgotten, but something they never knew. It is important for those amongst us who have had long years of Christian teaching to remember that the vast majority of people just don't know the stories, the ideas, the background information about Christianity that we very easily take for granted. I have usually asked couples getting married if they recall the story of the wedding at Cana in Galilee. I haven't kept a record of the answers of course, but I reckon less than half even remember the story at all. But then why should they? The chances are they haven't been brought up in a Christian home, it is not particularly likely that they heard the story at school, and they probably haven't been to church or Sunday school - so how should they know? The Old Testament assumes (I think rightly) that the burden of religious education lies with parents ("When your son asks you in time to come - what is the meaning of the precepts statutes and laws which the Lord our God gave you?") - and of course that is why the Baptism service makes such strong demands of parents in their promises.

So, let's look at that question Paul poses: Have you forgotten that when we were baptised into union with Christ Jesus we were baptised into his death? I am going to deal with the bit that Paul takes for granted, rather than the full question. Because before we can look at Paul's question, really there is the prior one which reads simple "Have you forgotten (or did you know?) that when we were baptised, we were baptised into union with Christ Jesus?" What does that mean? Joining the church is easy enough as an idea - we all join clubs, associations, groups of one sort and another. But joining a *person* seems a strange idea. The only other time we use it regularly in in talking about marriage - the union of two individuals in one unit. And that might be quite significant, since there are a few places in the New Testament where Jesus is referred to as the bridegroom, and the church as his bride. So that mystical idea which we know about two people, but one marriage, maybe is a help in trying to tease out what we mean by being baptised into union with Christ.

But let me offer three other pictures that the New Testament offers, to help pad that out. We hear about one in the Gospel reading today. Jesus talks about himself as the vine and us as the branches, and St Paul talks about that idea as one of us being grafted in. When a branch was grafted on to a vine, it became totally identified with it. It wasn't paying a visit, a temporary extra - it had ceased to take its life from its original roots, wherever they were, its whole being and survival depended now on the new source of life into which it had been grafted. We once had one of those triple apple trees in our garden - three different varieties on one trunk - two eaters and a cooker as I recall. But obviously you thought of it as one tree. But because it had been skilfully grafted, that one life, united in purpose was able to maintain its various distinctive identities. That seems a very helpful picture of what union with Christ is about. We become absolutely dependent on him for the life of God to flow through us. But that doesn't destroy or diminish our individual importance and

personality. Being grafted into the Christian vine doesn't mean being a Christian clone. We share a common source of life - but we bear fruit in the way that *we* are made to.

The second picture is the picture of adoption. Paul talks in the letter to the Galatians about Christians being no longer slaves but sons, because we have been given the gift of the Spirit which makes us call God Abba - daddy. Now everyone with an adopted child knows what that means - they are giving that child all the rights in law - and more importantly the love and sense of belonging - that would be given to the child that they had conceived and borne. There is no difference in law or in fact between an adopted child and a child of that marriage. And that is what Paul pushes at us as a picture of God's love in calling us his Sons. We are united with Jesus, his only Son; we are therefore equally sons if we are one with him. We have the right to closeness, to all the care and teaching of a father who loves us. Adopted - made one with Christ the Son of God, and therefore in a very special way, Sons of God also. Caryll Houselander once put it very graphically in terms of looking at people in an underground train. He said "Quite suddenly I saw in my mind Christ in them all. But I saw more than that; not only was Christ in every one of them, living in them, dying in them, rejoicing in them, sorrowing in them - but because he was in them and because they were here, the whole world was here too, in this underground train. I came out into the street and walked for a long time in the crowds. It was the same here, on every side, in every passer-by - Christ."

And thirdly there is the picture that St John offers in his Gospel of being re-born. A fresh start, a new hope. Birth marks the beginning of the new life. So does re-birth into Christ - we take on a new family - God as our Father, and our fellow Christians as brothers and sisters. And we are essentially looking forward. There is no past, whether we are new-born physically, or long in the tooth when we are baptised. As the New Testament says, the past is dealt with - and what is important is what the future holds - and to return to Paul's original question with which we began, that means the future not only in this life, but in the world to come as well.

Union with Christ - married to him, grafted into him, adopted as God's son, born again in his family. Those are all ways in to coping with an idea which is beyond words. But it is what we say at every Baptism - but maybe which we don't hear clearly, because it isn't a straightforward idea. But if Paul could take that bit of thinking for granted before he asked them about something they might have forgotten, maybe we should ensure that it is part of our basic thinking too.