

1 Pet 3.20-22: TAKE THE PLEDGE

[Chelmsford 24 October 2010]

A man fell into a pit and couldn't get himself out.

- An empathetic person came along and said, "I *feel* for you down there"
- A self-pitying person came along and said, "You haven't seen anything until you've seen *MY* pit"
- An evasive person came along and avoided the subject of his pit altogether
- A tax man asked if he was paying taxes on the pit
- A council inspector asked if he had a permit to dig a pit
- A news reporter wanted the exclusive story on the man's pit
- An optimist said, "Things could be worse"
- A pessimist said, "Things *will* get worse"
- A Pharisee said, "Only bad people fall into pits"
- Confucius said, "If you had listened to me you wouldn't be in that pit"
- Buddha said, "Your pit is only a state of mind"
- But ***Jesus***, seeing the man, took him by the hand and ***lifted him out of the pit***.

Have you got the point? ***Christianity is first and foremost a rescue religion.***

Thanks to our own stupidity we've fallen, as it were, into the deepest of pits, and we cannot get out unless someone gives us a hand.

The good news is that Jesus is there to give us a hand - he wants to save us from the mess into which we have got ourselves - he wants to save us from our sin and from the dire consequences of our sin.

All this is by way of introduction to some words of the Apostle Peter found in 1 Pet 3.20-22: "**The few people in the boat - eight in all - were saved by the water, which was a symbol pointing to baptism, which now saves you. It is not the washing away of bodily dirt, but the promise made to God from a good conscience. It saves you through the resurrection of Jesus Christ**".

I freely admit that at first sight these verses seem somewhat weird. However, once we begin to unpack them we shall quickly see their relevance.

For what Peter does is to use the story of the ***Flood as a pointer to baptism, and to two particular principles underlying both water events***

(a) God judges

God, so the story goes, was so appalled by the wickedness of Noah's contemporaries that he caused it to rain for forty days and forty nights - the upshot was that there was a great flood - and all living beings on the earth - human beings, animals and birds - were destroyed.

Whether or not it was a universal flood or rather a more localised phenomenon is neither here nor there. The thrust of the story is that those who ignored God were destroyed by the water. The Flood was a story of God's judgment in action.

The Flood is a reminder that when we go our own selfish and sinful way there is always a price to be paid, and that price is death.

For Peter, however, the story of the Flood was not just a story about judgment within the historical process, but rather *a picture of judgment to come at the end of time*. In this respect the teaching of the Bible is clear.

One day there will be a final reckoning.

There may not be another Flood like that experienced by Noah & his contemporaries, but there will be a time when all of us will have to face up to the consequences of our actions.

The fact is that *we live in a moral universe*, in which bills have to be paid.

God is no soft spineless character; rather he is a holy and righteous God, a God who is deeply concerned at the fundamental distinction between right and wrong

This is not just the teaching of the Old Testament - but of the New Testament too.

In particular it is the teaching of Jesus. Strange as it may seem to some, within the pages of the Bible *nobody spoke more clearly or more frequently about the judgment to come than did Jesus*.

- Jesus spoke of *two ways* open to us - one way which leads to God, and the other way which leads to destruction.
- Jesus spoke of *two groups* to which we may belong: we belong either to the group which he likened to wheat destined for the barn, or to the group which he likened to weeds destined for fire.
- Jesus spoke of *two destinies* which await us: for those inside the Kingdom of God there is a great party to come; but for those outside the Kingdom there will be no partying, but weeping and gnashing of teeth

Of course, Jesus was speaking picture terms - but these pictures as indeed the story of the Flood point to an underlying reality - the reality of judgement to come.

(b) God saves

But for Peter *the Flood* was not just a picture of judgment to come, it *was also a picture of salvation which may be ours*. For not all were lost in the Flood.

There was an ark - and thanks to that ark Noah and his family were saved. Yes, writes Peter, "**The few people in the boat - eight in all - were saved by the water**"

Sadly, we've tended to view the story of the Ark as a piece of music-hall comedy. "*The animals went in two by two, the elephant and the kangaroo*".

But the animals are an irrelevancy. The point is that **eight people were saved** from destruction. They were saved through their faith in God, faith expressed in building a boat were saved.

To their contemporaries their actions seemed foolish in the extreme - fancy building an ark, Mr Noah! But in the end it was their taking God seriously which resulted in their salvation.

To many people today all this talk about salvation seems foolish in the extreme.

Add to that tonight's baptismal service, it must seem weird beyond.

But in due time all this messing around with water will be vindicated.

For *we shall be saved* - not by faith expressed in the building of an ark, but rather *by faith expressed in the water of baptism*.

This is the point which Peter is trying to make:

"The few people in the boat - eight in all - were saved by the water, which was a symbol pointing to baptism, which now saves you. It is not the washing away of bodily dirt, but the promise made to God from a good conscience. It saves you through the resurrection of Jesus Christ".

The key words here are **"Baptism...now saves you"**.

Immediately we ask: How does baptism save?

1. The water of baptism does not save

Let me explain by a personal anecdote. When our youngest son, Benjamin, was born, he swallowed some mucus, and had to be moved into the "special care baby unit". One day I was talking with the senior nurse when she happened to open a drawer of her desk and out fell a pile of baptismal cards. 'Why', I wondered, '*should she have a stock of baptismal cards?*'. At once the answer flashed through my mind. They were there for emergencies - they were there for the babies who were not going to survive. The nurse kept those baptismal cards for emergencies - she and indeed many others brought up in folk religion believe that baptism saves.

But the mere fact of being sprinkled - or being immersed for that matter - doesn't save. As Peter says: **"The baptism which now saves you" is "not the washing away of bodily dirt"**.

It is not the physical act of getting wet which saves us.

Baptism doesn't make us clean like a bath after a game of rugger.

There is nothing magic about the water - the mere fact of having been immersed in this tank tonight is no guarantee of salvation

Baptism points to the cleansing power of the blood of Jesus, the blood of Jesus which can cleanse us from the deepest of sin's stains.

It is not the actual water which saves - but rather the faith expressed in baptism.

2. The promise made in baptism saves

"Baptism now saves you... the promise made to God from a good conscience"

NIV: ***"the pledge of a good conscience towards God"***

The underlying Greek word is variously translated as "promise" or "pledge".

It was a technical term used in the ancient world for making a ***contract*** (Latin: 'stipulatio'). It denoted an undertaking given by one of the parties in answer to formal question addressed to him/her

For a contract to be legal & binding there had to be a definite question and a definite answer. The question was: ***"Do you accept the terms of this contract and bind yourself to observe them?"*** The answer made before witnesses was: ***"Yes"***

Without that question and answer the contract was not valid.

The same thought is present here.

Baptism involves a kind of contract - ***a contract between ourselves and God made in the presence of witnesses.***

In baptism we make a formal promise to go the way of Jesus - we take the pledge.

In our hall at home we have a framed copy of *the pledge made by Caroline's great-grandfather in 1864*. It reads:

*Penzance Primitive Juvenile Temperance or Band of Hope
This is to certify that Richard Harris
is a member of this society having taken the pledge
"I do voluntarily promise that I will abstain from Ale, Porter, Wine, Ardent Spirits
and all intoxicating Liquors as beverages, and will not offer them to others"
Feb 13th 1864*

Tonight Mphatso & Nina will take the pledge - a pledge, however, not to abstain, but rather a pledge to follow Jesus. For baptism is the occasion when believers publicly runs their colours up the mast - when believers formally commit themselves to Jesus.

In some circles baptism is described as a "sacrament". The word sacrament can mean a number of things. Interestingly our English word is derived from the Latin word "sacramentum", which was the word for a soldier's oath of loyalty on entering the army. In their baptism **Mphatso & Nina will, if you like, be making their oath of loyalty** to Jesus as they enter into his army.

Or we may liken baptism to the marriage service: when the groom and his bride come to make their vows, they are already head over heels in love - their vows make no difference to the intensity of their love - but in the marriage service they are publicly sealing their commitment to one another, 'till death us do part'. Similarly in their baptism **Mphatso & Nina will be sealing their commitment to Christ, but not 'till death us do part', but rather for eternity**. For nothing shall separate them from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus.

As we stand in the water I shall ask first Nina and then Mphatso a double-question: **"Do you profess repentance toward God and faith in Jesus as Saviour and Lord"**. To which they must reply, **"I do"**

Without a question and a response of that kind baptism is invalid.

Or to put it another way, it is only when there is repentance toward God and faith in Jesus as Saviour and Lord, that baptism saves.

Let me spell it out a little more: **"Do you profess repentance toward God"**:

I.e. Do you resolve to turn from living for self and instead now live for God.

In the Bible repentance always means more than simply being sorry - it means a **turning around to go God's way**.

If we would be saved then we must be willing to go God's way, whatever the cost. Let's face it, it can be costly to be a Christian. Our values are different. To go the way of Jesus is by and large to go against the stream.

The second part of the question: **"Do you profess faith in Jesus as Saviour and Lord"**. It is not enough to repent. We must also be men and women of faith.

What is faith? Faith is putting our trust in the Lord Jesus. FAITH in the words of the old Sunday School definition is **'forsaking all I trust him'**.

This is the pledge Mphatso & Nina are called to make - a pledge to belong to Jesus and to belong to him alone.

In turn Jesus will keep his side of the bargain. He will save them.

3. *The Lord to whom we make our pledge saves*

"Baptism saves you. It is the promise made to God from a good conscience. It saves you through the resurrection of Jesus Christ

Peter here reminds us of the ultimate origin of our salvation.

Repentance and faith are necessary, but we are not *saved* in the first instance by our repentance and our faith, but *by Jesus*.

Let me give you an illustration. Suppose you, a non-swimmer, were to fall off Southend Pier when the tide was in and I was to throw a lifebelt to you - would you congratulate yourself for having grabbed hold of the life-belt - or would you thank me for having the presence of mind to throw a lifebelt to you?

The answer is obvious..

Likewise, in the first instance we are not saved by our response to the death & resurrection of Jesus, but rather by Jesus who died for us, Jesus who rose for us. Jesus saves. Jesus on his Cross and in his Resurrection has done everything necessary for our salvation

BUT nonetheless *there is one action we must take* - we must stretch out our hand and hold onto his hand.

Otherwise the outlook is bleak - otherwise we are still in our sin - otherwise we are still liable to judgment and to destruction.

Tonight *Mphatso & Nina are making their public response* to the salvation Jesus offers us all. My question is: *what about you?* Is Jesus your Saviour too?

Has he also lifted you up from the pit, as it were - or have you yet to stretch out your hand and grab his?

Have you yet to make the pledge and repent of your sin and put your faith in him?

Christianity is a rescue religion. Let's make sure that we allow Christ to rescue us!