



Hazelbank Presbyterian Church



Rev Alan Johnston

Having a baby baptized is an easy thing to do... Let me explain what it is I mean when I say this.

When you stand at the front of the church with your husband or wife and you are holding your little bundle of joy it is easy for you to take vows for your child. You first of all vow that you are a practicing Christian and that you believe in God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit not in an abstract way but in a very personal way. You then vow that you will bring your child up in a Christian home and also within the church. Now these things are easy to do because to date I have never heard a baby or a very young child getting teased or having fun poked at them because of what they parents vowed at their baptism.

I have never even heard parents getting fun poked at them for having their baby baptized. There is virtually no cost involved to either parents or baby. Why should there be? If the parents are indeed committed Christians then they are only stating the obvious and for them to bring their child up in a Christian home is natural. For example because I speak English and Tracey speaks English we are naturally and obviously going to bring our children up in a home where English is spoken. The same is equally true of the fact that because I am a committed follower of Jesus Christ and Tracey is the same it is both obvious and natural that we will bring our Children up in a home where Christ is honoured and loved. We will pray for our children and bring them into the fellowship of the church. Where things fall apart is where parents take vows they either are unsure of or quite frankly don't mean – then the vows are not fulfilled and it would be better for every one if the baptism had never taken place. Having a baby baptized is an easy thing to do...

Having yourself baptized is a lot harder. Sometimes, and it has happened twice here in Hazelbank, I have the wonderful privilege of baptizing an adult. Now that is a lot harder. Not because of the logistics involved but harder in one sense for the person being baptized because as they come to get baptized there is no one to take the vows for them. There is no one saying don't you worry, I'll do this for you. I'll say what has to be said. No they are on their own and they make their own profession of faith. They personally claim to follow Jesus, they make their stand before the congregation and claim Jesus help and strength to be the people they know they need to be.

In his book "The Cost of Discipleship" Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote:

"The cross is laid on every Christian. As we embark upon discipleship we surrender ourselves to Christ in union with his death – we give over our lives to death. The cross is not the terrible end to an otherwise god-fearing and happy life, but it meets us at the beginning of our communion with Christ. When Christ calls a man, he bids him come and die."

Claiming to be a disciple of Jesus is costly. For some it is more costly than others. Some allow their faith to shine out from the inside. Others for whatever reason hide theirs away and make it very personal to the extent that no one really know about it although some might suspect it.

Depending on where you live in this world your faith will have a different price tag attached to it. For example in the Bible belt of America the cost is relatively small compared with living in Columbia, Vietnam or China. The thing is, that if you claim to love Jesus Christ then you will face opposition in some shape or form. Just last week we were reminded of this when we read:

⁹“You must be on your guard. You will be handed over to the local councils and flogged in the synagogues. On account of me you will stand before governors and kings as witnesses to them. ¹⁰And the gospel must first be preached to all nations. ¹¹Whenever you are arrested and brought to trial, do not worry beforehand about what to say. Just say whatever is given you at the time, for it is not you speaking, but the Holy Spirit. ¹²“Brother will betray brother to death, and a father his child. Children will rebel against their parents and have them put to death. ¹³All men will hate you because of me, but he who stands firm to the end will be saved.

Today in Mark chapter 14 we read of a love scene. Not a typical love scene. Not the Hollywood sort of love but a love of woman for her saviour. A woman who was not afraid to count the financial cost. A woman who was not afraid to count the personal cost. We read:

¹Now the Passover and the Feast of Unleavened Bread were only two days away, and the chief priests and the teachers of the law were looking for some sly way to arrest Jesus and kill him. ²“But not during the Feast,” they said, “or the people may riot.”

The Feast of the Passover and the Feast of Unleavened Bread were really two different things. The Feast of the Passover fell on 14th Nisan, that is, about 14th April. It commemorated the night the angel of death passed over the Israelite homes in Egypt shortly before the Exodus from Egypt. The Feast of Unleavened Bread consisted of the seven days following the Passover. The Passover itself was a major feast and was kept like a Sabbath. The Feast of Unleavened Bread was called a minor festival, and, although no new work could be begun during it, such work as was, and I quote, “necessary for public interest or to provide against private loss” was allowable. The really great day however was Passover day. The Passover was one of the three compulsory feasts. The others were the Feast of Pentecost and the Feast of Tabernacles. To these feasts every male adult Jew who lived within 15 miles of Jerusalem was bound to come. But in actual fact Jews came from many arts and parts to be there on Passover day. Verse 3:

³While he was in Bethany, reclining at the table in the home of a man known as Simon the Leper, a woman came with an alabaster jar of very expensive perfume, made of pure nard. She broke the jar and poured the perfume on his head. ⁴Some of those present were saying indignantly to one another, “Why this waste of perfume? ⁵It could have been sold for more than a year’s wages and the money given to the poor.” And they rebuked her harshly.

During the meal a woman enters the room carrying an incredibly expensive jar of perfume. She not only opens the jar, but breaks it – the fact that it was broken means she intends it to be given entirely for Jesus!

The whole room was filled with the aroma.

John's account also tells us that she does not stop at his head, but pours the perfume on his feet, and then wipes his feet with her hair.

The plant that produces nard at this time was grown only in the Himalayas, and so the perfume is very expensive if the stated value of 300 denarii (a year's wages) is accurate. Imagine if you can your yearly wage being spent on something like this and what was done with it! Nard was literally a gift for a king. No wonder someone complained. John tells us it was Judas who started it – and then the disciples chip in. He rebuked Mary for this waste. But Jesus accepts this offering, and silences her critics.

⁶“Leave her alone,” said Jesus. “Why are you bothering her? She has done a beautiful thing to me. ⁷The poor you will always have with you, and you can help them any time you want. But you will not always have me. ⁸She did what she could. She poured perfume on my body beforehand to prepare for my burial. ⁹I tell you the truth, wherever the gospel is preached throughout the world, what she has done will also be told, in memory of her.” ¹⁰Then Judas Iscariot, one of the Twelve, went to the chief priests to betray Jesus to them. ¹¹They were delighted to hear this and promised to give him money. So he watched for an opportunity to hand him over.

My friends – how much do you love Jesus? If it is true love it should cost you. Paul J. Meyer wrote in *Unlocking Your Legacy*:

"Cost and self-sacrifice do not make something hard. Nobody feels sorry for the athlete who wins an Olympic medal, even though the person paid an incredible price through gruelling effort behind the scenes, denying himself or herself certain things, probably for several years, all for one hopeful brief moment of glory. The medal, once attained, minimizes every cost and self-sacrifice." Meyer continues, "Following God is similar in many respects. There are costs and self-sacrifice to be made, but that does not mean it is hard to follow God. Hard is when you compete but never win, invest but lose everything, work but receive nothing for your efforts, and show love but receive hate in return.... When I compare my costs and self-sacrifices with what I have already received and will receive in return, my costs and self-sacrifices are insignificant!"

How much do you love Jesus?

How much are you prepared to surrender to Him? How much are you willing to give to Him, not because He has asked for it but simply because you want Him to have the very best from you? Are you holding back?

Have you given Jesus so much... but not everything? You cannot be a little bit Christian in the same way as you cannot be a little bit in love... Is Jesus not worth it? Is He not worth all that you are and all that you have? He gave his all for you just so that you could have it all.

Phil.2 v.5 tells us:

⁶ Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself and became obedient to death— even death on a cross!

Let me finish with a true baptism story that I believe should cause us question our love for Jesus:

Ivan the Great was the tsar of all of Russia during the Fifteenth Century. He brought together the warring tribes into one vast empire - the Soviet Union. As a fighting man he was courageous. As a general he was brilliant. He drove out the Tartars and established peace across the nation. However, Ivan was so busy waging his campaigns that he did not have a family. His friends and advisers were quite concerned. They reminded him that there was no heir to the throne, and should anything happen to him the union would shatter into chaos. "You must take a wife who can bear you a son."

The busy soldier statesman said to them that he did not have the time to search for a bride, but if they would find a suitable one, he would marry her. The counsellors and advisers searched the capitals of Europe to find an appropriate wife for the great tsar. And find her, they did. They reported to Ivan of the beautiful dark eyed daughter of the King of Greece. She was young, brilliant, and charming. He agreed to marry her without ever setting eyes on her. The King of Greece was delighted. It would align Greece in a favourable way with the emerging giant of the north. But there had to be one condition, "He cannot marry my daughter unless he becomes a member of the Greek Orthodox Church." Ivan's response, "I will do it!" So, a priest was dispatched to Moscow to instruct Ivan in Orthodox doctrine.

Ivan was a quick student and learned the catechism in record time. Arrangements were concluded, and the tsar made his way to Athens accompanied by 500 of his crack troops-- his personal palace guard. He was to be baptized into the Orthodox church by immersion, as was the custom of the Eastern Church. His soldiers, ever loyal, asked to be baptized also. The Patriarch of the Church assigned 500 priests to give the soldiers a one-on-one catechism crash course. The soldiers, all 500 of them, were to be immersed in one mass baptism. Crowds gathered from all over Greece. What a sight that must have been, 500 priests and 500 soldiers, a thousand people, walking into the blue Mediterranean. The priests were dressed in black robes and tall black hats, the official dress of the Orthodox Church. The soldiers wore their battle uniforms with of all their regalia - ribbons of valour, medals of courage and their weapons of battle.

Suddenly, there was a problem.

The Church prohibited professional soldiers from being members; they would have to give up their commitment to bloodshed. They could not be killers and church members too. After a hasty round of diplomacy, the problem was solved quite simply. As the words were spoken and the priests began to baptize them, each soldier reached to his side and withdrew his sword. Lifting it high overhead, every soldier was totally immersed - everything was baptized except his fighting arm and sword. That is a true historical fact. The unbaptised arm.

What a powerful picture of Christianity today.

How many unbaptised arms are here this morning?

How many unbaptised wills are here?

How many unbaptised talents?

Unbaptised chequebooks?

Unbaptised social activities?

How many are there here this morning?

How much do you love Jesus?

Let's pray together.