

Marked Out for Christ

Some years ago a judge in the juvenile court in California noticed that many of the young people coming before him accused of criminal activity had tattoos on their hands and faces. The markings, often crudely made by the young person themselves, identified them as part of a gang and were deliberately visible to advertise their loyalty and pride in belonging to their particular tribe. Of course, gang membership was associated with violence and petty crime so that, later, when these young people grew up and tried to turn their lives around, they found they couldn't get work as any would-be employers seeing the tattoos feared trouble and wouldn't touch them with a barge pole.

The judge was concerned that these young people would be forever blighted by the tattoos even long after their association with a gang had passed, so he approached the Los Angeles County Medical Association to see if there might be a skilled plastic surgeon among them who would be prepared to remove the tattoos for no cost. He found one such surgeon, named Karl Stein, who readily took up the cause and pioneered many life-changing methods of dealing with and eradicating these marks of an ill-spent youth setting their wearers free to get a career and succeed in life.

Of course, if I suggest that our baptism is like a tattoo that identifies us as belonging to Christ it is without the negative connotations, indeed the meaning is entirely opposite and positive, but there are similarities and differences. Unlike a tattoo, baptism cannot be removed, we can never be 'unbaptised' and baptism cannot be repeated. It is what marks us out indelibly as belonging to Jesus and it is a proud badge of our desire to not merely associate our lives with his, but to be filled with his Spirit and be completely overwhelmed and taken over by him so that, as St Paul says, it is no longer I who live but Christ who lives in me. We become 'alter Christus' - other Christs. And that's an important difference. By baptism we do not just identify as belonging to Jesus' gang, we become part of him, our life is lost in his, we become molecules, organs of his mystical body.

Some of the writers of the early Church talk about baptism inserting us into Christ, grafting us into him, but St Paul speaks of us as being members of

the Body of Christ where he is the head and we are the limbs and organs. We are the body of Christ through baptism and we are his presence in the world today through the Church. Through our baptism we continue the mission Jesus received from the Father at his baptism, we are his saving presence in the world today, we are his eyes and ears, his hands and feet, his heart and soul. As one poet wrote:

Christ has no hands but our hands to do His work today
He has no feet but our feet to lead men in the way
He has no tongue but our tongue to tell men how He died
He has no help but our help to bring them to His side.
We are the only Bible the careless world will read,
We are the sinner's gospel; we are the scoffer's creed;
We are the Lord's last message, given in word and deed;
What if the type is crooked? What if the print is blurred?
What if our hands are busy with other work than His?
What if our feet are walking where sin's allurements is?
What if our tongue is speaking of things His lips would spurn?
How can we hope to help Him or welcome His return?

(Annie Johnston Flint)