

Last Sunday I found myself in church again. I rarely go now, but I'm sucker for a baptism. It was Lucy's that brought me back.

It's the water I love in baptism, not the words. The words that accompany rituals often seem to distract from the moment, trying too hard to describe that which can't be said, without any acknowledgement that language is inadequate and these truths are incomprehensible. The water, however, tells a story all of its own.

My favourite Philip Larkin poem begins with the words 'If I were called in to construct a religion I should make use of water...'. I would too. The existing religions got there before us, of course, and for good reason: water is such a central part of our being. Beyond the absence of breath, the absence of water will be what kills us first. It makes up over two thirds of our world, and our bodies.

But what really makes me love the water is the one fact I remember from schoolgirl science: water has a life-cycle that goes forever. The water in our taps and oceans and tears and clouds has been water forever. That means the water that was baptising Lucy has washed over every generation before her. It has bathed the bodies of the dead and the freshly born. It has been cried in the tears of saints and thieves. It has quenched the thirst of all history's people. And before there were people on earth, this same water carved valleys and coastlines from impermeable mountains. It shaped our landscape; it shapes our lives.

The words of the ritual break through my thinking: 'For you, little one,' the liturgy says, 'Even though you do not know it...' I looked at Lucy, this beautiful gift of life, being washed in this water that has been in the world forever, and that keeps her alive right now. I watched her parents hand her over to the story of fragility and resilience that all of humanity holds in common. I watched them and the community of friends and family, who love Lucy and make sure she has water to drink and wash her clean, speak the words that acknowledge that there are things to this life that are beyond us all. For that reason we wash her in this water that holds the memory of the tears and dirt and thirst of all life before and beyond her.

And I realize this is why I need ritual. I need the moments – rare and momentary, incomprehensible and unspeakable – that remind me I am human, next to you; part of all history's story of life and love, fragility and resilience. Our story, held in water since the beginning, and carving the landscape of our world until its end.

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