

Over this season of Lent I am taking the opportunity to reflect on the Sacrament of Baptism as practiced in the Church of Ireland. Marking as it does the beginnings of Christian life it is a sacrament of beginning, a sacrament of inclusion. It is a sacrament that has its roots in the death and resurrection of Jesus and so in the very early days of the Church Baptism was celebrated at Easter and Lent was a period of preparation for those who were coming to be baptised.

Baptism is about membership, membership of the Church, membership of the Body of Christ. Paul speaks of the Christian life as a growing into

him who is the head, into Christ, ¹⁶ from whom the whole body, joined and knit together by every ligament with which it is equipped, as each part is working properly, promotes the body's growth in building itself up in love. *Eph 4:15,16*

Baptism, birth, coming to faith, are but beginnings that are to be built upon. As we are reminded in the service of Baptism, faith is a journey, a journey of a life time, a growing into Christ.

Last Sunday it was our privilege to welcome three young children into the family of the Church. In the course of that service we reflected on the promises that lie at the heart of that service. There are the promises made by the parents regarding their upbringing of their children; the promises that were made on behalf of these children that our Confirmation Candidates will be making in their own name at Confirmation after Easter; promises made by the congregation to welcome and to encourage these children on their Christian journey.

The promises of Baptism are profound promises that go to the heart of our identity:

Do you reject the devil and all proud rebellion against God?
Do you renounce the deceit and corruption of evil?
Do you repent of the sins that separate us from God and neighbour?
Do you turn to Christ as Saviour?
Do you submit to Christ as Lord?
Do you come to Christ, the Way, the Truth and the Life?

As I always say these are not questions of people who have arrived, who have got it all sorted; these are questions of people on a journey, a journey into Christ, becoming more like Christ, making Christ present in the world in which we live and work.

In the Baptismal service, following on from the promises, the child is signed with the sign of the cross. As we do so we use the following words (they are printed out on your lesson sheet):

Christ claims you for his own.
Receive the sign of the cross.
Live as a disciple of Christ,
fight the good fight,
finish the race, keep the faith.
Confess Christ crucified,
proclaim his resurrection,
look for his coming in glory.
May almighty God deliver you from the powers of darkness,
restore in you the image of his glory,
and lead you in the light and obedience of Christ. **Amen.**

I want to reflect on this in the context of the portion we read as our Old Testament Lesson this morning, from Isaiah 55. This comes at the end of the portion of Isaiah, chapters 40-55, that is often known as 2nd Isaiah. This is thought to be of later origin than the first part. The first part, set in Jerusalem as the city is about to fall, speaks of a

judgement that is coming on city and upon the nation. The second portion, set in the context of the Exile in Babylon, speaks of hope, of renewal, of the prospect of a return to the Promised Land.

The portion we read today begins with words of open invitation. Water, wine, milk, honey all speak of the generous provision that awaited God's people in the Promised Land as they journeyed through the deserts of Sinai.

¹Everyone who thirsts,
come to the waters;
and you that have no money,
come, buy and eat!
Come, buy wine and milk
without money and without price.

²Why do you spend your money for that which is not bread,
and your labour for that which does not satisfy? *Isaiah 55:1,2*

Just as God invites his people so they for their part must respond.

⁶Seek the LORD while he may be found,
call upon him while he is near;
⁷let the wicked forsake their way,
and the unrighteous their thoughts;
let them return to the LORD, that he may have mercy on them,
and to our God, for he will abundantly pardon.

What we have here in this short passage is a coming together of two fundamental truths of God's gracious provision and man's response. I would often say that Baptism expresses a similar truth; God has given his all in Christ; it is for me to pick it up and run with it. And so we say 'Receive the sign of the cross', receive the sign of your redemption. Then live as a disciple of Christ, finish the race, keep the faith. You've started the journey; come, continue that journey with us. Then come the words spoken by the whole congregation:

**Confess Christ crucified,
proclaim his resurrection,
look for his coming in glory.**

These mirror words that we say in the Eucharistic Prayer in our Communion Service:

Therefore, Father, with this bread and this cup
we do as Christ your Son commanded:
**we remember his passion and death,
we celebrate his resurrection and ascension,
and we look for the coming of his kingdom.**

As ones baptised into the death and resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ, in word, in sacrament, in bread and wine, in daily living we encourage one another as we go out from here to be the hands, the feet, the lips of Christ in the world of today. This section of the Baptismal Service ends with a prayer for the one about to be baptised:

May almighty God deliver you from the powers of darkness,
restore in you the image of his glory,
and lead you in the light and obedience of Christ. **Amen.**

May God restore in you the image of his glory. I get a picture here of deep inner healing that goes to the very heart of who I am, of who we are, before God. We are made in the image of God, yet so often that image is obscured by pride, by selfishness; by just me being me, in the frailty, the wilfulness, the forgetfulness of my humanity. It is as I undertake this journey of faith, this journey with Christ, into Christ, as I learn in daily living what it is to repent of the sins that separate me from God and neighbour, what it is to submit to Christ as Lord, so that walking in the light and obedience of Christ I may show to the world something of the God in whom I live and move and have my being.