

Reflection for Pentecost 14 by Rev'd Canon Michael Last

From time to time we are joined at worship by those who are bringing their children to be baptised: sadly this does not happen that often these days. When do have such a service, it is often one that combines the two great sacraments of Baptism & Communion. When, though, was the last time each of us took a close look at the baptism liturgy of the Scottish Episcopal Church (Holy Baptism 2006), and especially section 5 which is entitled "Commitment to Christian Life"? During this section the parents are asked three questions:

..., as those who will love and care for this child will you continue in the Apostles' teaching and fellowship, in the breaking of bread and in the prayers?

Will you proclaim the good news by word and deed, serving Christ in all people?

Will you work for justice and peace, honouring God in all Creation?

It ends with the response by everyone present

This is the task of the Church.

This is our task: to live and work for the kingdom of God.

This section emphasizes unambiguously that baptism is not a one-off event, done today, and then forgotten; with life carrying on as usual. Rather having received the grace of God in the sacrament of Baptism, a new course or direction has been set. Those who are baptised simply taken the first steps on a journey, a journey with God, a journey that all of us, as part of the body of Christ have a responsibility to help and encourage.

In the lectionary, during the post-Pentecost season, two tracks can be used concerning the Old Testament reading – track 1 a continuous path, and track 2 a related path. During this year we have been using the related path. But today's continuous path reading comes from Exodus 12:1-14 (you may like to read it) and is the institution of the feast of Passover.

For the Hebrews, trapped as slaves in Egypt, that Passover meal was not just another meal, another event in the routine of life: it was the start of a journey with God, back to the promised land. It signaled a new beginning, a move from slavery to freedom, yet a journey that would also come with fresh challenges, a new set of difficulties they would have to overcome. The books of the Old Testament recall the ups and downs of that process for the nation of Israel.

Think of a young child, at birth: it's hardly able to lift its head; but as it grows it becomes more mobile. With that mobility, a new world opens up in front of it - a world full of not only excitement but also of danger. They need to learn to navigate that new world. Parenting involves guiding that child safely through those dangers. "No" so often becomes an important word.

The same is true for us as Christians on our journey of faith. We too need guidance: without it the dangers and attractions of the world quickly swallow us up. That is one of the important roles of the church community - to nurture and encourage discipleship.

How, for example, do we deal with those who offend us in one way or another? We all make mistakes and are often quick to criticize, sometimes justly and on other occasions unjustly. But how should such criticism be handled in the family of the church? This is exactly the practical question that Jesus address in our gospel reading "If another member of the church sins against you, go and point out the fault, when the two of you are alone, If the member listens to you, you have regained that one" Love is the key factor here - a love that cares despite what has happened - love that seeks to heal rather than destroy.

As Christians, we may avoid confrontation thinking it best to keep quiet, the result is things building up, and situations that should be questioned can go unchallenged. What we see here is the opposite,

questioning where that is necessary but done with love, not looking to destroy, but to build up.

Start, the gospel says, with a quiet personal chat. In so many cases this can work out the problem without it blowing up out of proportion. It involves listening - a word that comes up time several times in this passage. Listening, I would suggest, not just on one side but both sides, because few faults are all one-sided. The overall aim, as Jesus puts it, is to win our fellow member back - to restore and even enhance the relationship within the body of the church. Only if that fails do things get taken up a stage, and then only step by step. Again though, the same love is central: love that seeks to build up not to destroy.

This is just one example of the way we need to walk alongside each another encouraging and helping each other to grow. Other areas that need similar encouragement are prayer, worship, and social concern and it is with faith and love that is corporate rather than private and locked away.

Let me return to where I started - the idea of Baptism. One baptism liturgy includes an optional section entitled the "The Commission" it says this:-

As they grow up, they (the baptised) will need the help and encouragement of the Christian community, so that they may learn to know God in public worship and private prayer, follow Jesus Christ in the life of faith, serve their neighbour after the example of Christ, and in due course come to confirmation.

As part of the Church of Christ, we all have a duty to support them by prayer, example, and teaching. As their parents and godparents, you have the prime responsibility for guiding and helping them in their early years. This is a demanding task for which you will need the help and grace of God.

It is a reminder not just to the parents of a child being baptized, but to all of us that we have corporate responsibility concerning nurturing faith in one another.

Think of the Emmaus Road story; the risen Jesus walking with and alongside those disciples on that journey to Emmaus not criticizing them for a lack of faith or doubt, but helping them to understand what had happened and building their faith. We are traveling a journey of faith together, we need to support and encourage each other on that journey.

As St Paul puts it in his letter to the Romans

'Love your neighbour as yourself.' Love does no wrong to a neighbour; therefore, love is the fulfilling of the law.