

Sermon 29 September 2019 Baptism

Matthew 28:16-20

This short passage is the great commission to the disciples – go out into the big wide world and convert people; teach them about Jesus; convince them about Jesus; baptise them.

Two interesting points to note. Matthew says that some of them still doubted. What exactly did they doubt? Was this really Jesus? After all, they had seen him dead and buried, so to speak, not so long ago. Was this really the Messiah? We actually don't know just what they doubted. Perhaps they are being human, just like us – we also have our moments of doubt and fallibility.

The second interesting point is that Jesus refers to what became known, quite a few years later, as the doctrine of the Holy Trinity – Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

Anyway, I don't want to focus on those two points, but rather the real principle of the passage which is the commission Jesus gives the disciples, and by definition, us. And let's begin by looking at the word *baptism*.

The word *baptism* is really a secular word that has taken on a spiritual significance, and it means to totally immerse, to completely saturate so something that is baptised is never quite the same again. An example is saturating a piece of cloth in a vat of dye, so that the cloth takes on the properties, the colour of the dye. So it becomes the word to describe someone who has been saturated, immersed in Christ. You can see why total immersion is often practised in baptism.

The early Christians adopted another word which they particularly applied to baptism, and also to Holy Communion. We talk about baptism as a sacrament of our church. The word *sacrament* is derived from the Latin word *sacramentum*, which means the oath of allegiance or the military vow made by a soldier in the great Roman armies. So in the case of baptism, we become faithful soldiers and servants of Christ. But sadly not all the baptised are 'faithful soldiers and servants of Christ.' Some desert, returning to the secular world, no longer conforming to Christian standards and values, no longer soldiers of active service. Let's be honest, most of us are guilty of desertion at times.

Some turn up only for special parades – Christmas, Easter. So they are not really serving soldiers of Christ.

Some seldom leave the barracks. They spend their Christian lives in camp. That is, they assiduously attend church and read

their Bible, but don't venture out into the battlefield, the mission field. They are not out there caring for the needy, the disenfranchised. They also are not really serving soldiers of Christ. And again, I am sure many of us at times find ourselves opting for the comfort and security of the barracks. Baptism is a commitment to follow the commands of Christ. The great command of Christ, apart from to love God, is to love all and sundry. I would like to quote from Archbishop Winston Halapua's farewell sermon in Holy Trinity Cathedral, Suva, prior to his retirement in August 2108. *'The Risen Jesus is with us now, encouraging us in mission and in our walking together. We are called to walk together courageously with Christ into our needy world, into the world which God loves.'*

Baptism is the beginning of a new journey. We are all on a journey, every single one of us. The question we have to ask ourselves is this – does that journey include God? Is Christ part of that journey?

Let me illustrate that with a true story. At the 1996 Olympics, an American runner, Derek Redmond, was entered in the 400 metre race. For years and years he had trained for this race, with his father as his trainer and coach. He was a favourite to win this race.

During his heat, Redmond was well out in front of the pack when his Achilles tendon snapped. He stopped running but did not drop out of the race. Limping badly, he pulled himself forward, dragging his wounded leg behind him. The crowd stood and cheered, but the pain was excruciating and it was doubtful that he would make it. Suddenly, a middle-aged man jumped over the guard rail on to the track. He caught up with Derek, put his arms around his waist and helped him all the way to the finish line, the crowd on their feet applauding and openly weeping.

Who was the man? It was Derek's father. When the race was over, Derek told the press, 'He was the only one who could have helped me because he was the only one who knew what I have been through.'

Life is something of a race. It was the writer of Hebrews who said, *'Let us run with endurance the race that God has set before us.'* Hebrews 12:1. At baptism we are just getting out of the starting blocks. In baptism we look to God as our trainer and coach. He alone knows what is ahead of us, so he alone is the one who can give us direction and strength to complete the race.

Little Susana, as you set out on your race, you have many supporters cheering for you. May Christ be your guide, your

companion and your mainstay. Amen.