

Sermon 29 September 2024 Baptism

Hebrews 12:1-4 Matthew 28:16-20

This short gospel 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. Remember that this takes place well after the Resurrection, so what exactly did they doubt? Was this really Jesus? After all, they had seen him dead and buried, literally, not so long ago. Was this really the Messiah? We actually don't know just what doubt Matthew is referring to. Perhaps they are being human, just like us – we also have our moments of doubt and fallibility. You might remember that just last week I alluded to the fact that the disciples struggled to come to terms with what was happening to Jesus in the context of him being the Messiah.

The second interesting point is that Jesus refers to what became known quite a few years later as the doctrine of the Holy Trinity: *'Baptise them in the name of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.'*

Anyway, I don't want to focus on these two points, but rather on the real principle of the passage which is the commission Jesus gives to his disciples, and by definition, to 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 soldiers 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 2018: *'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.'* That really does encapsulate so well the expectation and challenge laid upon us.

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? Whom do we look to for support and direction? Let me illustrate with a true story.

At the 1996 Olympics in Atlanta, an American runner, Derek Redmond, was entered in the 400metre 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 cheering and openly weeping.

Who was this 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.'

As we run the race of life, we also will face obstacles, disappointments, challenges. In terms of support, we do have a variety of options in terms of support. One very good option, of course, is God. He understands exactly what we are experiencing and what we are feeling, probably better than anyone because he is part of us, he is our very life-force.

One of my favourite Bible verses for reflecting on when life's challenges feel a tad overpowering is Isaiah 41:10: *'Don't be afraid, for I am with you. Don't be discouraged, for I am your God. I will strengthen and help you. I will hold you up with my victorious right hand.'* Truly encouraging and uplifting. Christ himself tells us in our gospel reading: *'And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age.'*

Life is something of a race. It was the writer of Hebrews who said, and I quote from our first reading: *'Let us run with endurance the race that God has set before us.'* At baptism we are just getting out of the starting blocks. In our race of life, 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. We have many supporters cheering for us, but if we allow him, God can be our number one supporter.