

Chapel of St Peter and St Paul, ORNC
11.00am Choral Eucharist with Holy Baptism
Nineteenth Sunday after Trinity [6 October 2024]

readings: Genesis 2. 18-24; Hebrews 1.1-4; 2. 5-12; Mark 10. 2-16

Over the years of my ministry as a priest, I've occasionally encountered people who tell me that although they regard themselves as Christian, they have no desire to be part of the Christian Church. When I ask their reasons for this, they point out that there's an awful lot going on within the Church that seems to bear little resemblance to the life and teachings of Jesus. Surely it would be better, then, to try to follow him authentically in their own way, rather than get entangled all the trivia and posturing of such a hidebound institution. The fact that for nearly 2,000 years, Christians have been railing against the Church for its shortcomings – surely this, too, justifies the conclusion that the Gospel is better found in other places and by other means. So, as we've gathered today in this Chapel to celebrate the baptism of a little girl into the Christian Church, I think we're obliged to ask, yet again, just what it is we're doing here, and why, in the face of all contrary evidence, we still believe this sacrament is essential to her life in Christ.

In trying to formulate an answer to this question, we needn't look any further than the three scripture readings we've just heard read aloud this morning. Because all three of them, in different ways, emphasise the absolute centrality of relationship to our spiritual identity. So, in the Book of Genesis, we're told that no sooner has God begun the world and created the first man than that he concludes 'it is not good that the man should be alone' (2.18). *It is not good that the man should alone*: this verse is important because it makes clear that the subsequent creation of a woman isn't just about providing the man with a physical partner. Rather, and much more than this, it underscores that both of them will have, through the other, a spiritual companion as well, and in this way, they truly will become 'one flesh' (v.24). If we then turn to the New Testament and consider at the reading from Hebrews, we're reminded again just how inescapable relationship is and remains to God's work of salvation. So much so, of course, that God himself chooses to become directly relatable through the person of Jesus Christ. And not only that, but by becoming a human being among us, by becoming intimately knowable, God makes clear that we are spiritually bound, not just to him but also to each other. So, Hebrews says of Jesus and of us that 'he who sanctifies and those who are sanctified have all one origin'. And that is why Jesus isn't ashamed, as Hebrews puts it, to call us his brothers and his sisters (2. 11). When we recognise that we are related to Jesus, we are, by definition, also recognising a relationship with every other member of his family. Which is why, in the end, there really isn't such a thing as a Christian in isolation. Because it's impossible to follow by ourselves the One whose very purpose has always been to bring us closer together.

Now, if our only purpose today were to defend the practice of baptizing people in church, insisting upon relationships as central to our faith would surely be enough. In being baptized here today, Lily is going to become a member of a universal Christian community, a community which will be open and available to her for the rest of her life. But, of course, our purpose here today is about so much more than this: it isn't just about defending our sense of belonging and community, it's about celebrating it. And this is where our reading from the Gospel of Mark reminds us of something else essential about living as a Christian among Christians. In this passage, a moment is described when people place their children before Jesus, in the hope that he will bless them. But first the disciples intervene, thinking it's somehow their job to protect Jesus and to maintain order. Having rejected this interference and welcomed the children, Jesus then concludes that 'whoever does not receive the kingdom of God like a child shall not enter it' (10.15). *Whoever does not receive the kingdom of God like a child shall not enter it*: when we receive our relationship with God, when we receive membership in the Christian family, we must receive this newfound status as a

gift. Not as something that we have earned, not as a sign of our own virtue or worthiness, but rather, with the simple receptiveness of a child receiving a gift. Because like a child being brought forward for a blessing, or indeed, being brought forward for baptism, the only thing we can bring in return is our openness, our dependence, and our joy. This is all that God asks of us in our relationship to him, and it is, finally, all that we are expected to bring in our relationship with the wider community of faith. To withhold these things, to try to negotiate terms or to insist upon standing apart, is finally only to deprive ourselves of the gift that is being so freely given.

So, as we see Lily Hérítier being baptized a few moments from now, we have an opportunity to recognise the gift of belonging that we, too, have received, just by virtue of being here. It is, of course, a gift that can bring with it plenty of disappointments and frustrations, but it is a gift nonetheless, and not just a gift of relationship but of saving and transformative power. This is the gift of the One so ready to take us in his arms and bless us, to lay his hands upon us, and not just today, but every day of the world to come.