

Two journeys: baptism homily

St Philip's Anglican Church, O'Connor
Revd Rebecca Newland
23 November 2013

Hebrews 10 and John 4

For P—— today is the end of one journey and the beginning of another. This is one of the things baptism is about. It is about the turning away from one way of life and turning to a new way, the way of Jesus Christ. P—— has made a long and dangerous journey to Australia to begin a new life in this country. Nobody takes that journey unless they are serious about embracing a new life. It takes courage, guts, determination and faith. Qualities P—— seems to have in abundance. We hope and pray that he will find a safe home here. P—— has made a physical journey but he has also been on a spiritual journey, a journey to Christ and a new way of belief and faith.

The readings today were chosen because they are about journeys of faith and the freedom and abundant life we are invited to share in Christ our Lord. They were also chosen because P—— and I have been either using them in prayer or speaking of them together.

The story of the Samaritan woman at the well is about a journey, a meeting place and an invitation. The woman, in the course of her daily work, fetching water, meets Jesus at Jacob's well. Jesus is traveling from Judea to Galilee and stops at the well, tired and no doubt hot from the travel. The disciples have disappeared to find food. And so alone, the woman and Jesus meet. The woman is of course minding her own business, getting on with life but Jesus speaks to her. He reaches into her world and is available.

This is how the Spirit of Christ Jesus works sometimes—we are going about our life, making plans, and Christ shows up and reaches out. Somebody says a word, an invitation is given, a question is asked, we read something in a book and suddenly there before us is an opening into a new life, a new way of being. P—— has his own story about how Christ has reached into his life. We all have our own stories. Our stories of questions and doubts, our hopes and our longings.

Our stories of how Christ Jesus offers us the answers to our deepest longings and gives us the chance to be renewed and reborn. Like the woman at the well we continue to question but we also find that we are lovingly known and supported as we take up the new life. The water of life Jesus offers is the great gift of love and grace, of the Spirit of Jesus at work in us and in our lives bringing the seeds of faith to abundant and fruitful life. As part of that new life P—— has chosen to be baptised not just with his own name, but with the name Jacob. He had already chosen that name before he came to St Philip's for the first time.

One of the wonderful things about preparing P—— for baptism has been the great questions he asks. We have been meeting most Fridays for Morning Prayer at the church here and saying the daily office together. In that time we explore the readings and talk of God and faith. This is something we will continue to do and as always anyone is welcome to Morning Prayer.

Since P—— has come from such a different culture and from a different religious background his questions are fresh and new. We have both decided we do not understand the Trinity but take it as a matter of faith and revelation. We have decided that Jesus was pretty cool when he said you will not know when the last days are coming or when I will return. Instead don't worry and live your life in trust and hope. We have been humbled as we find ourselves forgiven. We find forgiveness for past wrongs, for past sins, for all the things that weigh our hearts down and trap

us in fear and resentment. We find that Jesus in his teachings guides us into being able to forgive others, even though we find it hard. Mostly we have delighted in the awesome truth that in Christ we have complete freedom.

Paul says in the letter to the Galatians that it is for freedom Christ has set us free. This is not freedom to do what we want, with no constraints. It is freedom to live unbound from all the things that enslave us and bind us—our misguided thoughts, our past mistakes, our resentments, the expectations of others and our own mixed up self- image.

It is the freedom to step out in confidence and faith knowing that Jesus Christ, the resurrected Son of God, is our brother and friend. It is the freedom to follow in the footsteps of Christ and grow ever more like him.

You see, although P—— will turn his life over to Christ today and although he will make certain vows and commitments to be his disciple and to love God and his neighbour with his whole being forever ... it is actually the faithfulness of God that makes all this possible.

In that reading from Hebrews that is part of every Friday morning office and that we heard today we are assured we have complete freedom and confidence to enter the sanctuary by means of the death of Jesus. A new and living way is opened before us.

In the time of Jesus, when he taught his disciples, the sanctuary of the temple was the most holy place in Jerusalem. No one was allowed to enter it, except priests twice a day. And in the sanctuary was the Holy of Holies, surrounded by a veil. Absolutely no one could enter here except the High Priest and he could only go in there one day a year, on the day of Atonement. If you did venture in there it meant death from the religious authorities. I hope you are getting the picture here of a very sacred and holy place. It was a no go zone for anyone who was not a priest, male or Jewish.

But by Jesus' loving sacrifice on the cross the veil was ripped in two—in reality maybe but symbolically definitely—and from that moment all peoples, all nations, all genders, everyone gained access to God. This is God who reached out in and through Jesus Christ across time and space to meet us and call us into a reconciled relationship, into a redeemed and new life. It is the enduring faithfulness of God who makes all this happen—not our works and our worries—but our gracious and loving God whose faithfulness endures throughout all generations as our Psalm says.

It is a faithful God who has called P—— and who will be with him in this new life he is embracing. It is a faithful God who will keep calling him back to way of Christ. And all God asks in return is that P—— is faithful, that we are faithful. To put it simply we are to trust in God, no matter what dark clouds are gathering, no matter our failures, no matter our success, no matter where we are or what ends up happening. For we have come to that place here we can approach God in confidence and freedom knowing we are at one with him and he will always fulfill his promises to us.

P——, it is time of new beginnings. God will be faithful to you, Christ will never forsake you, the Spirit will always sustain you—and if you fulfill your promises you will grow in the stature and fullness of Jesus Christ our Lord. You will grow into a man of God who will bring to the world blessing and goodness. Our prayers, our support and our love are with you as you take this wonderful step. Amen.