

Sermon for Easter 6 (May 9th 2021)

Mother Emma

Readings Acts 10:44-end, 1 John 5:1-6, John 15:9-17

Our first reading today, read to us by Stanley, brother of Oliver, who is shortly to be baptised, is the last bit of a much longer story in the Book of Acts.

The apostle Peter has been summoned to the house of a Roman centurion named Cornelius, who had received a vision from an angel, telling him to hear what Peter has to say. Peter is a bit reluctant to go and visit someone who is not only a Gentile (a non-Jew), but is also a high-up member of the occupying Roman army, yet God has also sent him a vision to encourage him. When he arrives, he tells Cornelius and all his household the story of Christ's life, death and resurrection and is astounded to see them all filled with the energy and joy of the Holy Spirit. Our reading told us that he exclaimed, "Can anyone withhold the water for baptizing these people who have received the Holy Spirit just as we have?"

Baptism today is what is known as a "universal sacrament". It is a sign of God's grace and forgiveness and a first step on a journey with God which will last throughout our lives. It is freely offered to people of all churches and denominations, of every country, nationality, race, age and gender.

I have been present at the baptism of an hour-old baby and of a lady of 94 and seen candidates representing an enormous range of nationalities and languages, a wonderful reminder of the extent of God's church.

Peter is surprised to hear that a pagan Roman, who, after all, came from a religious culture with a whole complex set of gods and goddesses of its own, is choosing instead to follow Christ and to ask for the baptism which will publicly identify him as a Christian.

But perhaps one key to this lies in the teaching of Jesus recorded in our Gospel reading: *"You did not choose me, but I chose you."*

In today's society, people tend to think that everything we do is about our own choices – whether lifestyle or self-identification, or group association. Yet the radical truth which Jesus shares with us is that God himself chooses and calls us, even if we do not recognise the fact, or if we allow ourselves to think that it is our own choice to attend church or follow him. He chooses men and women, adults and children, from across his Creation, and gives us the hope and inspiration we seek.

Shortly, as we come to baptise Jemiah and Oliver, we shall hear the words, spoken to all of us as the people of God in this place, *"Faith is the gift of God to his people. In baptism the Lord is adding to our number those whom he is calling."*

It is God himself who calls us, and we move forward after our baptism as part of the "pilgrim people" united on a journey with God. We are part of a shared story and a shared intention.

This week in the church calendar, we reach the final Sunday before Ascension. On Thursday, we shall mark the day when the forty days of Resurrection appearances by the Risen Christ come to an end with his Ascension into Heaven, where, we are told, he is seated at the right hand of God most high, eternally interceding for us at his Father's throne in Heaven. The time of Jesus' Incarnation, of his human existence on earth, will be over, and we shall spend ten days awaiting the sending of his Holy Spirit at Pentecost, who still dwells as God's Spirit among us.

Following Ascension and Pentecost, we shall re-commit our lives as people inspired by the Holy Spirit, people who, together with Oliver and Jemiah and their families and godparents, have pledged to follow Christ. As baptised Christians, part of the worldwide family of God's church, we may ask ourselves how this can be visibly manifested in our lives.

Jesus himself sums this up for us in our Gospel reading today:

"This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you."

Jesus loved us so much that he gave up everything to enable us to know God's love, forgiveness and hope. It is a big ask to imitate such a love and one which we may continue to puzzle over day by day for the rest of our lives, whilst seeking opportunities to live out this commandment.

Tomorrow is the start of Christian Aid Week. Many of us will have seen the appeals, posters and television adverts showing those most seriously affected by the devastation caused by climate change which is the particular subject of this year's fundraising.

We who are fortunate enough to find plenteous food in our local supermarket and endless water in our taps can scarcely imagine how it feels to depend so entirely on the unreliable rains which bring clean water - to survive, to grow essential crops and to allow subsistence farmers to satisfy their own and their children's hunger.

Perhaps we might consider making a donation via the online envelope on Christian Aid's website, or working to amend our own lives in order to change theirs, treasuring and respecting, rather than exploiting God's gifts to us, in ways which could eventually change the lives of others, leading them out of poverty and restoring their human dignity.

Of course we are also conscious of so many other ways we are offered, to help people whose lives are subject to fear, oppression and suffering, and we each reflect and make our decisions about how we can best show God's love to the world, in whatever ways, financial, practical, political or prayerful that we can.

But as we come together to reflect with Oliver and Jemiah today, on our own baptismal promises, we are called once again by today's Gospel to remember that our lives as Christians are marked by love – by the greatest love of all, shown to us by God in Christ - and we are asked constantly to show that selfless love to others.

Amen