

“BAPTISM IN FAITH”

A message by Jo-ann Stenton to the congregation on 8th January 2017

Today, being the first Sunday after Epiphany, is about the revelation of Christ being made in the image of Man, but also of the baptism of Christ.

You may here people say he/she had an epiphany, meaning a revelation of some magnitude, and it is amazing how these revelations occur in numerous ways to people all over the world.

For me, my epiphany was as a result of my children asking questions about baptism and confirmation.

It was through them that I came to realize that I had lost touch with my church and my Christian convictions. As an eleven year old I had attended an Inter-schools Christian Fellowship Camp and accepted Christ as my Saviour. However, in the intervening years I had lost sight of what being a Christian actually involved.

I had not gone off the rails and done anything majorly wrong, but I had ceased attending Church, except for special occasions and only prayed when something went wrong or when something extraordinarily good occurred.

Around that time a nearby church was having a Lenten Bible Study so I decided to join that study group, and rediscovered Christ and his enduring love.

I had to re-learn many of the things I had forgotten, like believing in God's power, trusting that he has a plan for me as well as for YOU. I had to learn about having faith. Trusting in God even when I don't get what I ask for.

When my grandson Luke was only 6 years old, he was attending a baptism in church and turned to his mother and said “Mummy, I don't remember Rebecca being baptised.” So his mother explained to him that his father thought that it was best to wait until a child was old enough to make their own decision about whether or not they wanted to be baptised.

Luke listened carefully and after the service he went up to his mother and said. “Well I think I am old enough to know that I want to be baptised. Do you think Daddy will agree?” Later that day the parents discussed this amongst themselves and then with the Parish priest. The priest asked Luke why he wanted to be baptised to which

he replied that he wanted to REALLY be one of God's children and be part of God's family like the babies that were baptised in church.

Because Luke appeared to have a reasonable understanding of what it meant to be part of God's family, and was not an infant, the priest decided that Luke should undergo a simplified version of what is required for confirmation. Rebecca was only three at that time, but whatever her big brother did she wanted to do too. So the two of them attended 3 preparatory classes. Rebecca was given pictures to colour in and paper to draw on the same as Luke. At the end of the final session, the priest asked Luke what did he think being baptised was all about. He stopped and thought for a moment and then said "I think it is about being bathed in the Holy Spirit".

When the priest was relating this story to their mother she said that Luke's answer was the best answer she had ever had from any person in the preparatory classes which she had taken.

I thought there was a message in this. It does not matter how old or how young we are, each of us has a unique understanding of how we experience God's love. Luke had his epiphany at the age of six, although now, as a young adult, he often wonders if God has forgotten him when he is so ill and in excruciating pain. Luke and his sister Rebecca have a chronic debilitating illness called Juvenile Arthritis, which often causes them to spend periods of time in hospital.

Rebecca, however continues to have faith despite the many adversities she has encountered.

Revealing God's plan for each of us.

I think that most of us have uttered prayers in the hope that God will answer our prayers.

I hope I'll get well. I hope that I'll get another job. I hope it will be a better day tomorrow. That is hope.

Faith is thanking God in advance. It's believing that God is already doing what we have asked for – that it is happening in the present – That the answer is already on the way.

In Mark 11: v 24 it says "... I tell you, whatever you ask in prayer, believe that you have received it, and it will be yours." Notice the past tense,

“...believe that you have received it ...”

Faith is believing that you have already received what you asked for. If you waited until you received the answer to thank God, would that be faith?

No, that would be gratitude? Thanking God in advance is having faith.

For instance, if I were to give you a check for \$1,000 and I said, "You know, I want you to have this gift." Would you wait until you cashed it in order to thank me? Well, if you looked at my bank account on some occasions you probably would.

But, let's pick Bill Gates, head of Microsoft, he's got a lot of money. If Bill Gates wrote you a check for \$1,000, would you wait until you cashed it to thank him? No! You'd go ahead and thank him because you knew you could cash it and the money was on its way.

The Bible is full of stories that show this principle that faith is thanking God in advance.

Something that I have found difficult at times, is believing that God always hears and answers prayers.

His answers are not always not what I had hoped for.

God is not like a vending machine where you put in a prayer and get out whatever you want. Although even this can be fraught with difficulties. Just recently I put my card in the ATM, it started making all sorts of strange noises, with words flashing on the screen and after what seemed ages, came up with a message that there was an error on my card and to contact my nearest branch. This was certainly not what I was expecting.

However, returning to the biblical message, a vending machine may give you a variety of things. But God will only give you what is for your benefit.

In Acts 10 verse 34 in today's readings, Peter tells the gathered people that "God does not play favourites". Whoever you are and wherever you are from, if you take God seriously and do the right thing, God will welcome you with open arms!

Peter goes on to say, that after Jesus baptism, He travelled around working for good and helping people get back onto their feet. God was with him in all this. Then He was crucified, but three days later God raised him to life and let us see him. God was always with Jesus and so he is with us.

As a Christian, you still have the exact same problems a non-believer has, it's just that you have a special power to help you through them, something to help you cope with the stresses of life and deal with them more effectively.

God doesn't say you won't have any problems and faith doesn't exempt you from them. In fact, sometimes, we pray for God to remove a difficulty, or a problem, and instead of taking it away, He gives you the strength to go through it. Now, why does He do that? Because God is more interested in your character than He is in your comfort. God wants to make you a person of integrity and stability and values. And the only way you get character is by going through tough times. You don't know God is all you need until God is all you've got. And then you have to depend on Him. And I can vouch for that.

Exactly three years ago I was going back and forth to the Alfred Hospital, David taking me back in a dehydrated state and in excruciating pain. It took two months for the doctors to diagnose that I had Osteomyelitis of three vertebrae in my back. In the intervening time I had to believe that I would recover as I believed that I needed to have the research I had recently completed published. And I did – I both recovered and had my work published.

Anybody can trust in God when things are going well. But real faith develops in the valleys of life when the road ahead looks treacherous and the outcome is delayed.

Martin Luther King had a dream for racial equality. He didn't see it happen in his lifetime. But that didn't mean he didn't have faith.

Moses had a dream of going into the promised land. But he died in the desert. He never did get to go into the promised land. However, the bible says later he did get to see it on the Mount of Transfiguration, when God brought him, with Elijah, to Jesus and they talked. He did get to see it, eventually.

So what is the message for today? It is about the baptism of faith, it is trusting God even when you don't get the answer that you want. Your prayer will be answered, but in God's time, not ours and maybe not in the way that we would like it to be.

So here is a thought to take away with you

*“Each of you are writing a Gospel,
A chapter added each day,
By the deeds that you do,
And the words that you say.*

*What you write is read by others,
If it is false or it is true.
So tell me, what is the Gospel
According to you?” - Anonymous*