

Deuteronomy 34: 1-12
Psalm 90: 1-6, 13-17
I Thessalonians 2: 1-8
St. Matthew 22: 34-46

Pentecost 22 2023.

“So deeply do we care for you that we are determined to share with you not only the gospel of God but also our own selves, because you have become very dear to us.”

I Thessalonians 2: 8

Many of us who are Anglican were baptized when we were very small. Baptism is a means of grace from God, but like all gifts of grace, we need to recognize and respond to God’s work in our lives. So, many of us who were baptized as babies or small children were later encouraged to follow Jesus Christ in the fellowship of his Church. Then, sometime during our early teen years, many of us participated in Confirmation classes. We were taught the basics of what it means to follow Jesus Christ, and if we chose, we participated in a service of Confirmation. During Confirmation, we professed our faith in Jesus Christ along with the rest of the congregation, and the bishop would pray that we would continue to grow in fellowship with Jesus Christ and with one another, through the power of the Holy Spirit...

I know that this route of following Christ isn’t true for everyone, but it is true for many of us. Speaking only for myself, I was baptized in September 1963, and I affirmed my faith in Confirmation in June 1976. I don’t remember my baptism!... I *do* remember my Confirmation, and it was an important event for me...

Now, this pattern of growing into the Christian life – Holy Baptism and Confirmation -- is called “Christian Initiation.” Some of us have different experiences... For example, some of us grew up in homes in which life of faith was not a priority – or our family practiced a different faith. We might have begun considering lives of faith for ourselves in adulthood, or maybe, after we faced a spiritual crisis. Some of us were lonely, and we found a sense of fellowship and belonging by being part of God’s family. I’m not saying this process of paedobaptism and later Confirmation is the *only* way to begin the Christian life. Sometimes our spiritual lives are a little messy; some of us have spurts of growing deeper, wandering, and then returning...

I do believe that baptism needs to be taken seriously, not undertaken casually. However, *if* we have come to a place when we sense we belong here; *if* (even if we don’t have all the answers and don’t understand everything in the Bible, for example, or the Church’s worship), yet we have some sense that we are responding to God’s work in us; *if* we are willing to admit our own foibles and flaws, and our deep need for forgiveness and healing – then, whatever age we are, I encourage us strongly to explore receiving the sacrament of Baptism...

Preparing for baptism doesn't mean that we have all the answers; but it's saying "Yes" to God's love shown in Jesus. Baptism is a means of grace and a blessing... If it's a key way to receive God's amazing love... what's holding us back?...

If we happen to be baptized already, but never got around to being confirmed, then I encourage us to prayerfully consider being confirmed (or received into this part of the Church family)... Archbishop Anne will be coming to visit St. Brice's, on the Sunday after Easter, in about 6 months...

So, I want to encourage us all to take our faith seriously, and joyfully, and to participate in the sacramental rites of Christian Initiation, Baptism and Confirmation... If you want to learn more, talk to me or some other leader at St. Brice's. No pressure; but a warm invitation...

Now, how we do learn about being followers of the Lord Jesus?... Well, a lot of the Christian faith is learned by modelling. As we're among other Christians who are practicing how to love deeply, we learn by being part of the parish community. That's part of it – we learn how to worship together by being with *others* who are worshipping, and so on...

Another part of developing as a Christian is to learn the basics of the Christian faith. When I was being prepared for Confirmation, it was expected that we would have a pretty good sense of what was in the Anglican Catechism (p. 544). They are in a question-and-answer format, and are meant to be understood by youth who are starting high school. I think the Catechism is great, and I kind of suspect a lot of us could use a refresher course. God has given us minds to use for his glory, and for the world...

And yet... and yet... I'd like to express a little caution: Following Jesus Christ is not like winning an argument, or being willing to think through great puzzles about God. It is also a commitment of the heart (deciding to love) and a matter of the will (choosing how we will follow). A willing heart without using the minds God has given us can make us wobbly about Christian teachings!... An intellectual assent without a movement of the heart is, I believe, a cold response to the loving gift of Jesus...

That, finally, brings us to the second reading for today. St. Paul the Apostle was an amazing first-century Teacher and Evangelist. St. Paul was determined to establish Christian congregations in cities and towns wherever he could. One of these cities was Thessalonica, in what is now present-day northern Greece...

We have 2 letters which Paul wrote to the Thessalonian Christians in our New Testament. Today's reading is from Paul's first letter. This might be the very first piece of the canon we have, written about 20 years after the death and resurrection of Jesus...

Paul begins today's reading by mentioning casually that he had been suffering a lot for his faith, particularly in the Roman city of Philippi. But then, Paul goes on to talk about the Thessalonians. Clearly Paul is proud of the congregation, and loves them deeply. Paul writes tenderly,

But we were gentle among you, like a nurse tenderly caring for her own children. So deeply do we care for you that we are determined to share with you not only the gospel of God but also our own selves, because you have become very dear to us.

In helping the Thessalonians grow in their faith, it isn't just clever arguments of the mind (although St. Paul could make those arguments too)! Rather, he came to them with a gentle heart. "We were gentle among you, like a nurse tenderly caring for her own children." He loves them. "You have become very dear to us." St. Paul gives his own life; "we are determined to share... our own selves..."

I suggest this is another way to share the faith, and live our the faith, with one another. I don't think most people are won for Christ by being defeated in an intellectual argument! Rather, we draw one another in by how we treat one another; how we love one another... So many of us have already been beaten up badly by life. Here is a place for a different form of belonging – receiving love from one another; and most of all, receiving *God's* love, shown supremely through Jesus, by the power of the Holy Spirit...

Are we willing to share ourselves, even when it hurts a little? What are we willing to give from ourselves to others?...

My dear friends, I invite us to live beautifully for the Lord. As part of the process, may this parish community be a place of warmth, even tenderness, so more and more of us will know the goodness and mercy of God revealed to us; now and for ever.

Amen.