



2nd Easter, Baptism Year C – April 11, 2010

Acts 5:27-32, John 20:19-31

A Homily preached by the Rev'd Tara Livingston

Today we celebrate the baptisms of (names). Together we will renew the vows taken either by us or on our behalf at our own baptism. We recite the words as they are written in our leaflets and we will say Amen at all the right places. And for some of us, we will secretly cross our fingers as we assert our belief in the promises of the Nicene Creed because we don't really understand it as relevant to our lives. And for some of us, we will leave this place and forget all about what we have promised. But I propose a different response, an active response, a response that will truly demonstrate that we have Christ with us and in us out in the world. Baptism is the sign of new life in Christ. Baptism unites Christ with his people. That union is both individual and corporate. Christians are, it is true, baptized one by one, but to be a Christian is to be part of a new creation which rises from the dark waters of Christ's death into the dawn of his risen life. Christians are not just baptized individuals; they are a new humanity.

Baptism is participation in Christ's death and resurrection (Romans 6.3-5; Colossians 2.12); a washing away of sin (1 Corinthians 6.11); a new birth (John 3.5); an enlightenment by Christ (Ephesians 5.14); a re clothing in Christ (Galatians 3.27); a renewal by the Spirit (Titus 3.5); the experience of salvation from the flood (1 Peter 3.20-21); an exodus from bondage (1 Corinthians 10.1-2) and a liberation into a new humanity in which barriers of division, whether of sex or race or social status, are transcended (Galatians 3.27-28; 1 Corinthians 12.13). The images are many but the reality is one.

Today we hear about the aftermath of Jesus' death and resurrection. The disciples are behind locked doors for fear that the Romans will now pursue them to stop them from continuing Christ's work. They are uncertain, they are nervous and I would imagine, they are losing faith. And then Christ appears to them and says, Peace be with you. Just that. Simple and eloquent; peace be with you. And all of the fears and doubts subside and once again they are strengthened to carry on the Gospel of Jesus Christ out into the world.

For all but doubting Thomas. Poor Thomas.

The word "doubt" is actually a mistranslation of the word – it does not appear in John's Gospel – only in Matthew's post-resurrection story. If doubt is an attitude of uncertainty or wavering belief then Thomas' reaction is definitely not of doubt. He places conditions on believing.

"If" he sees the holes in Christ's hands "then" he will believe. How often do we approach our faith relationship as a legal contract in which we seek to establish the terms by which we will respond with faith? "*If I have historical proof...If I have a sign...If near-death experiences can verify...If God would do...If Jesus would cure...Then I will believe in Christ...Then I will know that God exists...Then I will know that there is life after death...Then I will make a commitment of faith.*"

We replicate the folly of conditional Thomas each time we establish for Christ how Christ needs to operate in our lives and each time we ground our faith in what we demand from God, rather than in what God does in Jesus Christ and through the Holy Spirit.

If my mother's cancer goes into remission, then I will believe.

If my son begins to feel better about himself and finds some friends, then I'll go to Church.

If my daughter stops dating that dreadful man, then I'll write a cheque for the Easter offering.

If my Anglican Communion stops bickering amongst themselves, then I'll reinvest my time, talent and money.

We all have our Thomas moments – placing conditions on how we expect God to respond to our prayers.

It is important to note that in John's text of the moment where Thomas comes into contact with Jesus he never really does put his hands in his side – he just responds with the ultimate relational confession of faith, "my Lord and my God."

From the reading in Acts we hear that the disciples continue to go out into the world spreading God's word despite the fact that the authorities have told them not to.

And Peter responds that they must follow the word of God, not the word of man.

Peter stood before the authorities and spoke his truth in the face of dire consequences. Can we say the same?

The families and sponsors of those being baptised today will make promises on the behalf of themselves and the children. So I ask that you really pay attention to what the promises are and whether or not you, like Peter, will stand up for those beliefs in the light of possible hardship. Will you keep watch for the evil forces in the world, like poverty and prejudice, and speak out on behalf of those oppressed? Will you remain focussed on God and God's plan for you rather than taking the often easier more seductive path of distractions? Do you really promise to accept that Jesus is with you and that God loves you and to tell others of your convictions?

Two weeks ago in our Desmond Tutu study we talked about how people will know we are Christians. We made a list of all of the attributes that Christians live by; loving your neighbour, looking out for those less fortunate and taking part in praise and worship. But we also figured out that we know many Jewish people, Muslim people and even non believers who live a similarly moral life. The only way that people will know of our faith is if we speak about it. In public. Outside of these walls. I know, a very un-Anglican thing to do but we are called in our baptismal covenant to spread the good news of the Gospel to the world.

And when we do so we will run into a lot of "if" "then" folks; people who put conditions on their participation in a Church.

We are a funny lot. We pray each week in the Lord's Prayer, "thy will be done" and we say it with conviction. And yet we continue to put conditions on our prayers.

Because what if it is not God's will that our prayer be answered in the way that we think it should? I myself say, thank God for unanswered prayers because otherwise I would be married to my sweetheart from fifth grade, Jeff Collins. Or if not him, then certainly Al Holman. Or that nice Jewish fellow who's mother hated me Brian Friedman. Thank God for unanswered prayers.

I'd ask you to think of your "if", "then" prayers. Be honest. Think about what conditions you put on truly becoming an outspoken advocate of Christ in the world. Think about what powerful change we could make in our community if we, as the followers in the Book of Acts, spoke with one voice and with one accord. We may not be able to unify the voice of the whole Anglican Church – and may be that's one of your "if", "thens", that if the Church becomes united (and comes to the decision I want them to) then I'll really get behind this whole Church message thing.

I will offer you this, one "if", "then" that we are asked to take on as our own. If we allow the Holy Spirit to move within us, if we allow God to show us the way, then we can share the message of Jesus with the world around us.

Imagine. We cannot put our hands in his pierced side but we can respond, as Thomas did, with the words "my Lord and my God."

And for that, thanks be to God.

Amen