

St Lawrence Day 2018 Sermon
Micah 6:6-8; Phil.2:1-11; Matt.28:16-20
Baptism and Discipleship

Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptising them in the name of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

And go they did, from Jerusalem to the ends of the earth, even to the grey wet islands off the coast of Northern Europe, into the Roman province of Britannia. The first Christians probably came to our land as traders or soldiers, mere decades after Jesus gave his great command. Some of them will have come to the Roman town of Verulamium, just up the road, where the English Church gained its first martyr, St. Alban, in the year 250. Maybe some came even to this spot, whatever it was like then. We know there was a church here by 1086, when the Normans wrote the Domesday Book. And then of course came 1154, and this building, St. Lawrence. A thousand years of response to that great command, go and make disciples of all nations, baptising them in the name of Father, Son and Holy Spirit. And 864 years later there's us, following the same command. Baptising people and making disciples.

For most of those years the font would have stood at the crossing at the back of church, where everyone could see. Where you had to walk past it every time you came into church, reminding you always of your baptism. In 1970, they tucked into the corner down here, where no-one sees. That's a great shame. And I would love to move it back. To move it back to make it clear, once again, that baptism is what our church is about. If you ask the Bible why God wants there to be a church, not a bad answer is – to baptise people, and make disciples.

What do you do when you baptise someone? Well, take the other word for it: christening. Christ – Inning. You take someone, a little baby say, and you put them in Christ, and Christ in them. Christ-Inning. All his goodness, all his love, all his power – all the battle he fought with darkness and evil, and the great victory he won on Easter Sunday – all of it is planted deep within the baptised person. It's no longer far away, long ago, in someone else: it's in you. St. Paul says somewhere, thinking about his baptism: 'it's no longer I that live, but Christ who lives in me.'

And if that sounds too mysterious, here's the practical version. St. Paul again, in Philippians Chapter Two: Let the same mind be in you, which is in Jesus. Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves. Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others. Let the life of Jesus work itself

out in you, that life which looks like a Cross, which constantly empties itself out so that others might live. Be generous, radically, wildly generous in everything you do: in how you give your love, your time, your money. Be people without egos: who don't take offence, who don't hold grudges, who are not up themselves. Being a Christian is not complicated, though it is very difficult. What does the Lord require of you, but to do justice, and love kindness, and walk humbly with your God?

Baptism is about starting on that life, letting the Christ-life flow within you. And making disciples – the other part of Jesus' great command – is what we do as a church to make that happen. To help each other to understand and to live out what our baptism really means, this new life in Jesus. Baptising, and making disciples. That's why you have a church; that's why St. Lawrence's is here.

And our big challenge is bringing the two together. We baptise thirty five, perhaps forty babies a year here. Only a very small number become anything like committed Christians, regular worshippers, disciples. Their parents, for the most part, don't seem to connect what happens at the baptism with an ongoing life of discipleship, let alone an ongoing life of Sunday mornings here. So, how to bring the two together?

Well, some Christians would say that St. Lawrence's gets things the wrong way round. We baptise people, and then wonder why they don't become disciples. Maybe we should make the disciples first, and only then baptise them. Practically that would mean putting a lot more emphasis on people coming to church and growing in faith before we baptise their children. Baptism, this view says, is about discipleship: you've got to know what you're getting into. You've got to want it, and work for it. Such a policy would probably mean baptising less people than we do now. But that would be fine, because those we *did* baptise would be readier for it. It's about quality, not quantity.

That's not a stupid view. More and more churches are going for it. And if we're not going to, we need to know why.

So... here's the counter-argument. Quality, not quantity, says the anxious church. But this is people you're talking about, people and their relationship to God. How do you judge *quality*? I was taking a funeral recently where the family told me, as so many families do, that their mum had not been especially religious. She never went to church, never spoke about God, just seemed an utterly secular person. Nice, but utterly secular. Until just before she died, and someone asked if she was scared, and she said straight back, as naturally as anything, 'Scared? Of course I'm not scared. I believe in Jesus Christ.' Now what was the

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And actually, when you listen to most people – nearly *all* people – who bring their children for baptism, there's some sort of faith at the bottom of it. Even the ones who seem most concerned about getting into a Church of England school, or having a big party, or pleasing Granny – even them, when you scratch, have some sense of wanting to connect their child's life with God. Even if all the word 'God' means so far is a vague sense or fumbling for something beyond themselves, something big and loving and good. People want to touch their child with that, and they think that this is the place to do it. Do we really want to complicate that? Do we really want to suggest that that desire is not quite good enough, that they need to try a bit harder? Let the little children come to me, says the Lord Jesus, and don't you dare try to stop them. It's to such as these that the Kingdom of God belongs. By all means, do everything you can afterwards to help people grow, to become better disciples. That's essential, and St. Lawrence's needs to do it much, much better - but let your first word be unqualified, unreserved, pure *welcome*.

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Baptism is about starting on that life, letting the Christ-life flow within you. And making disciples – the other part of Jesus' great command – is what we do as a church to make that happen. To help each other to understand and to live out what our baptism really means, this new life in Jesus. Baptising, and making disciples. That's why you have a church; that's why St. Lawrence's is here.

And our big challenge is bringing the two together. We baptise thirty five, perhaps forty babies a year here. Only a very small number become anything like committed Christians, regular worshippers, disciples. Their parents, for the most part, don't seem to connect what happens at the baptism with an ongoing life of discipleship, let alone an ongoing life of Sunday mornings here. So, how to bring the two together?

Well, some Christians would say that St. Lawrence's gets things the wrong way round. We baptise people, and then wonder why they don't become disciples. Maybe we should make the disciples first, and only then baptise them. Practically that would mean putting a lot more emphasis on people coming to church and growing in faith before we baptise their children. Baptism, this view says, is about discipleship: you've got to know what you're getting into. You've got to want it, and work for it. Such a policy would probably mean baptising less people than we do now. But that would be fine, because those we *did* baptise would be readier for it. It's about quality, not quantity.

That's not a stupid view. More and more churches are going for it. And if we're not going to, we need to know why.

So... here's the counter-argument. Quality, not quantity, says the anxious church. But this is people you're talking about, people and their relationship to God. How do you judge *quality*? I was taking a funeral recently where the family told me, as so many families do, that their mum had not been especially religious. She never went to church, never spoke about God, just seemed an utterly secular person. Nice, but utterly secular. Until just before she died, and someone asked if she was scared, and she said straight back, as naturally as anything, 'Scared? Of course I'm not scared. I believe in Jesus Christ.' Now what was the

quality of her faith? It didn't turn up on Sundays, it had never done a preparation course, it wouldn't *qualify* for baptism in an anxious church – but my goodness, it was deep and real.

And actually, when you listen to most people – nearly *all* people – who bring their children for baptism, there's some sort of faith at the bottom of it. Even the ones who seem most concerned about getting into a Church of England school, or having a big party, or pleasing Granny – even them, when you scratch, have some sense of wanting to connect their child's life with God. Even if all the word 'God' means so far is a vague sense or fumbling for something beyond themselves, something big and loving and good. People want to touch their child with that, and they think that this is the place to do it. Do we really want to complicate that? Do we really want to suggest that that desire is not quite good enough, that they need to try a bit harder? Let the little children come to me, says the Lord Jesus, and don't you dare try to stop them. It's to such as these that the Kingdom of God belongs. By all means, do everything you can afterwards to help people grow, to become better disciples. That's essential, and St. Lawrence's needs to do it much, much better - but let your first word be unqualified, unreserved, pure *welcome*.

That's what a parish church is for. We are not a club for the committed. We are for all the people of Abbots, without them having to be members, or earn their place here or qualify. Whoever they are, whatever they have done, whatever they believe, St. Lawrence's is their spiritual home – home, as one poet put it, being 'the place where, when you go there, they have to take to you in / ... something you somehow haven't to deserve.' It's why the doors of this church lie open, literally, physically open all day, every day, for all the people of Abbots. Something you somehow haven't to deserve. Home.

And that's why, on St. Lawrence's Day, we celebrate this place, and with all the people of this parish for centuries past and centuries to come, we can sing – as the choir will in a few moments – truly, we are glad to come into the House of the Lord.

Peter Waddell