

Because God First Loved Us

A sermon preached at St Stephen's uniting Church, Macquarie Street, Sydney on Sunday 6 July 2014, by David Gill. The service was a celebration of holy baptism and holy communion. Readings were Romans 7:15-25a and St Matthew 11:25-30.

In a few minutes we will receive young Jonathan into the Christian faith. He doesn't know it yet, but he is about to belong to us.

Not just us St Stephen's or us the Uniting Church, but upper-case US – the whole, wonderful, vast and varied Church of Jesus Christ across the centuries and throughout the world.

Jonathan will be reminded of this, when he can read, by what's on the back of his baptismal certificate: a list of the churches that accept what we're doing today as an authentic baptism – Anglican, Catholic, Antiochian Orthodox, Armenian Apostolic, Congregational Federation, Greek Orthodox, Lutheran, Presbyterian, Romanian Orthodox and Uniting Church. This baptism welcomes him into a big family.

In the past, children presented for baptism often had god-parents, who promised to mentor them in the Christian faith. For this morning we thought of inventing a new category: god-brothers! However, these days god-parents are usually called sponsors or companions. So, Sue and David, Sam and Ben, that's what we're calling you. In a few minutes we will hear you promising to be Jonathan's caring *companions* for the Christian journey that lies before him.

Some denominations, as you know, only baptise adults, on confession of faith. Their approach is to be respected. A case can be made for it. But I am glad the Uniting Church, to quote our Basis of Union, baptises "those who confess the Christian faith, and children who are presented for baptism and for whose instruction and nourishment in the faith the Church takes responsibility".

Every baptism, of course, is special. But there is something about the baptism of a small child that makes it extra special. The candidate hasn't a clue about what's going on, or why, or what it means. That very cluelessness is a vivid reminder of what is the gospel, for all of us. It demonstrates that what matters supremely is not our hold on God, but God's much stronger hold on us; not your decision for Christ, but Christ's decision for you.

There is a beautiful statement, often used in baptisms in the Uniting Church. We stole it from the Reformed Church of France. It goes like this:

*Jonathan, for you Jesus Christ has come, has lived, has suffered;
for you he endured the agony of Gethsemane and the darkness of Calvary;
for you he uttered the cry, "It is accomplished!"
for you he triumphed over death;
for you he prays at God's right hand;
for you, Jonathan, even before you were born.
In baptism, the word of the apostle is confirmed:
"We love, because God first loved us".*

Substitute your name for Jonathan's, and there you have it. The good news, for everyone: "God first loved us". God has turned to us, long before we ever thought to turn to him. God in Christ was born for us, lived for us, suffered and died for us, rose triumphant for us. It's all grace.

That's the significance of *holy baptism*: God's initiative-taking, self-giving, life-transforming love in Christ. All for you, young Jonathan. A gift bearing your name. Today you join the community of amazing grace.

That's the significance of *holy communion*, too: God's self-giving love in Christ. For each and every one of us there is the unconditional invitation we heard in this morning's gospel -- come to me, take my yoke upon you, learn from me -- and the unconditional promise -- you will find rest for your souls. Here is a table at which everyone has a place. Here is bread and wine, charged with the divine presence, offered to all. Again, it's all grace, amazing grace.

And that grace is unconquerable. The reformer Martin Luther used to console himself, in times of difficulty and doubt, by reminding himself "I am baptised!" No matter what may happen, I belong to Christ. In good times and in bad, I belong to Christ. Come hell or high water, I belong to Christ. I am his, and he cannot be defeated.

After we process young Jonathan, the service includes an exhortation addressed to each one of us. *Sisters and brothers: Always remember that you are baptised, and be thankful.*

Always remember. Somewhere at home you probably have a certificate of Christian baptism, like the one we're about to give Jonathan. Dig it out. Read it. Think about what it signifies. Be very thankful.

Live out your baptism! Live out your communion! Separately and together, let us strive to be what we are: a living cell in the body of Christ.

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