

Sermon for Epiphany 3 (24th January 2016)
Baptism of Noah Samuel Evison

Firstly, I'd like to add my own welcome to little Noah here, and of course to Paul and Sarah his parents, and his Godparents, relatives and friends with them – I'm delighted to see you here today.

This is an important occasion in Noah's life, though he won't be aware of that for a long while. It's also important for his parents and Godparents, as you commit yourselves to a serious undertaking. And just in case the rest of us feel we can sit back and leave all the responsibility to them, there's plenty in this service to remind us how much we are all to a degree responsible for one another, and for making Noah and family feel welcome and supported in the wider family of the Church.

Parents and Godparents are asked to 'pray for him and draw him by your example into the community of faith'; and we in turn have a responsibility to help him on his journey with God, which continues for the rest of his life, and ours. The Christian faith is not something you can simply get and that's it; it's an ongoing process, a journey or pilgrimage, with new discoveries, new challenges and new rewards all along the way. We are told to give Noah the 'help and encouragement of the Christian community...to know God and to follow Jesus Christ.' Today we have various symbols to illustrate his launching out onto that journey.

There's the sign of the cross, made with anointing oil on his forehead. This is a very ancient practice, an invisible badge of identity with all those on the path of life opened up by Jesus giving his life for us on the cross. Just the other day I was at an exhibition at the British Museum, and there was a bust of a Roman Emperor's head, beautifully and realistically carved in polished black marble. But someone had crudely bashed off half his nose – thought to be a Christian showing his contempt for the Emperor's demand that everyone should bow down and worship him. And someone else had also been at the sculpture – clearly a skilled craftsman – in a more constructive way. On the Emperor's forehead was a deeply, carefully carved sign of the cross. It demonstrated that even a pagan Emperor was in truth under reign of Christ, and could be saved from his arrogance if he wished.

The next main sign is that of water. The introduction described this as a 'drowning' – but don't worry, the word was in inverted commas – a symbolic, spiritual drowning of the sinful life in the water of renewal. In any case, anyone with the name of Noah is surely well equipped to escape drowning! Water is also a reminder of Christ's own baptism by John the Baptist, and of his own dying and rising again to New Life, pioneering that same great transition for us. Then, at the very end of the service a lighted candle is given, symbol of the light of Christ, which shines through the darkness of all the evil that is in the world, and which lights our way to all that is good and true. We are asked to carry that light of Christ within us, wherever we go.

All this may sound like a heavy responsibility. But the thing is, the journey does not have to be undertaken alone. In fact it *has* to be *not* alone. That does not mean we're all

expected to be identikit Christians – far from it! We who come here to St Peter’s are all different – in character, in our opinions, our likes and dislikes about many things, and in the way we interpret the faith, and the path we feel God is calling us to follow. It’s well known that a good team – whether at work, in sport or whatever – needs people who are different enough to make different contributions to the whole. If a football team was of all eleven strikers, it would be disastrous; let alone if all eleven were goalies!

In our first reading today, St Paul was writing to the new Christians at Corinth in Greece, and he used the analogy not of a football team, but of the human body. There’d been some cliquiness and rival factions among them, so he reminded them of how our bodies work so well, and in fact can only work at all, because they have so many different parts working together. We need eyes as well as ears, feet as well as hands; even the humblest parts have their essential function, different from any other. Yet they all work together to make the whole body, and if even one is damaged or removed, the whole body suffers or is restricted.

This, he says, should be the model for a Christian community: not each member simply swanning off or diving in regardless of anyone else; yet not descending into a stifling conformity either, but valuing one another’s different contributions.

So, it’s a message of loving support and encouragement for Noah at the start of this great journey, from us all, and above all from God; a message of challenge and responsibility – but also of loving support – for those nearest to him; and it’s a reminder to the rest of us here, of things we know but must never forget. May God bless us all and support us with his wisdom and loving care, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Harold Stringer

The reading mentioned was 1 Corinthians 12, v. 12-31a