

Baptism, Forgiveness and Stewardship

17/9/17 Fr Michael

'Baptism, forgiveness and stewardship all rolled into one,' that's the task that is set for me this morning - have you got forty minutes to spare?

At college there was often talk of, 'my story.' It is never pleasant, but some times we have to tell our story, to understand why we are where we are.

'My Story' - now that's something you have as well. We all have our story - how we came to be where we are right now, what led up to our being here on a Sunday in September, and for us all it probably includes much about our faith and our relationship with the church. Some of it we can recite freely, but some of it will be buried in time. If you were baptised as a baby, as I was, I doubt that it can be remembered, except in the form of a certificate and photographs of the day. Today indeed marks a new chapter in Francesca's story - as she comes to church to gain membership through baptism, something that has occurred since New testament times. Francesca becomes a member of a world wide family of believers through word and sacramental action - water, oil and word.

But what is it all about? Why bother with all of this fuss in our modern world and sophisticated society? Perhaps, because we all fundamentally believe in good, and that good has a face - the face of Jesus who is himself the face of God and who is the fount of all love and light. Francesca, although she can't yet answer for herself, wants to believe that goodness and love will always win. Now, very neatly indeed, the chapter that our gospel was taken from in Matthew is all about Jesus; teaching of how we should live together as God's people. Last week he showed how to resolve conflict and today he answers Peter's question about forgiveness. "So if someone sins against me, how many times must I forgive? Seven times?"

Peter knows that forgiveness is part of faithful living as a believer and he thinks that surely seven times is enough forgiving - enough love and forgiveness to please God. But Jesus says those memorable words, "Not seven times but seventy seven." In other words Jesus is saying that forgiveness is essential to a faithful, good life with him. This is meant to be at the heart of our way of life as Christians. Now, most of us can accept that - but can we truly practice it? It's hard! The Christian life is hard - when we get bullied or angry or hurt or abused or alienated - how do we move to boundless forgiveness?

Well Jesus gives us some clues. The story of the slave and the king shows a king who is extremely generous in forgiving and then it shows a slave who having been forgiven cannot pass that forgiveness on even a little to someone who has a meagre debt. Well we are that slave - if we don't forgive others their trespasses or sins or debts - although the king has already forgiven us in his vast generosity. Goodness intends to lead to goodness. Gratitude for what we are given daily by God should lead to a grateful heart willing to give our whole selves to God in praise, thanks, time, talent and yes - some money. The stewardship of our lives involves giving forgiveness.

Now the other clue Jesus gives us is in the punishment. If we refuse to truly forgive others - not say 'you are forgiven' and then at a later date bring up the issue again because 'we can forgive but not forget' then we haven't truly forgiven. For people who lead their lives like that, Jesus says there will be a reckoning. If we say we love our neighbour but actually don't really like them, we will be found out - it's not true loving - it's not true forgiveness.

Through baptism we belong to God - we are God's people - we are the body of Christ - and forgiveness and gratitude are at the core of what Jesus expects from us. If we remember the wrongs we have suffered, the hurt we feel we are signing up to the way of this world, and not the kingdom of God, or God's ways. If we fundamentally believe in goodness - in Godness - then we must forgive with generosity in our hearts and then in our lives - and we all begin to break the cycle of evil and hatred and violence.

"The power of God is in love and forgiveness, not in vengeance and bloodshed." (Dr Courtney Cowart) We are called and then sent out to 'love and serve the Lord' so we must go with generous hearts and forgive - and some of that 'giving' in the word 'forgiving' must be aimed at the body of Christ, the church. The church that Francesca is baptised into must be forgiving, loving and open - generous in heart and mind - a church that practices hospitality for everyone.

Amen.