

The Way Forward

11 10 09

Eternal Father

who at the baptism of Jesus

revealed him to be your Son,

anointing him with the Holy Spirit:

grant to us, who are born again by water and the Spirit,

that we may be faithful to our calling as your adopted children.

(Collect for the Baptism of Christ)

Unusually today I have two texts. The first is from this morning's gospel:

'What must I do to inherit eternal life?' (Mark 10 v17)

The second is the opening of our Old Testament reading from Amos:

'Seek the Lord and live.' (5v6)

During this morning's service, we are fortunate to have the baptism of Phoebe Rose Gravier. It's always lovely to be able to baptise a baby here at St Bartholomew's and it is especially good when the child we are baptising has been born to a couple, Jean-Louis and Victoria Gravier, who were married here almost two years ago on 13th October 2007.

Baptism is a Christian rite of passage which marks the beginning of our Christian life. Its roots are unsurprisingly in a Jewish ritual purification – the immersion in a bath in order, literally, to wash away the dirt and symbolically to cleanse us of our

sins, our guilt resulting from our wrong-doing. Baptism is an outward sign of an inner reality – that we are Christians in fact as well as in name. For Christians, baptism replaces another Jewish ritual, the naming ritual of circumcision, in which on the eighth day after his birth, a boy receives his given name and his foreskin removed as an outward sign that he is a member of God's Chosen People, the Children of God.

In the Church, there is a debate about baptism, about whether or not we should baptise babies or wait till a person is of an age to ask to be baptised herself. Though I myself was baptised by total immersion as an adult, I firmly believe in infant baptism, which is what you might expect an Anglican priest to say since our Church, the Church of England, is very much in favour of infant baptism as the standard, default position. The reason is obvious and, to my mind, persuasive: it allows Phoebe to be brought up on the inside. She is being nurtured as a Christian in a Christian family and as part of the wider Christian family which is the Church. It allows Phoebe to grow in faith as she grows up and the vows that are taken on her behalf Phoebe will be able in due time to swear for herself when she comes eventually to confirmation when the Bishop, laying hands on her forehead, will anoint her with the holy oil of Chrism and will bestow on her the Holy Spirit.

I believe that baptism marks the beginning of our life as a Christian though it may well have begun beforehand. I believe that our formation as Christians is the work of a lifetime; it is a journey we start from birth and will only end with our death which marks our transition from this life to the life of the world to come.

To help her on this journey, I am dedicating to Phoebe the double text from this morning's sermon, the question from Mark 'What must I do to inherit eternal life?' and a possible answer from Amos: 'Seek the Lord and live.' The young man's question to Jesus is a good one – what do I have to do in order to make sure that when I die, I don't cease to be? It is a question about right living: how to behave in this life in order to merit eternal life. Jesus' answer is pragmatic – listen to what God is telling you do, i.e. the Ten Commandments. What Amos is suggesting is more general: 'Seek the Lord and live.' The prophet recommends an attitude of mind, of belief in the Lord and of nurturing the desire to seek him out, to be with him and as far as possible to know him. To do so is to find a beautiful God who loves us and sees us as beautiful, embodied souls. There is no doubt that Phoebe is beautiful in truth as well as in the eyes of her parents, Jean-Louis and Victoria. The wonderful and astonishing truth is that in the sight of God not only is Phoebe beautiful but so are we all.

I have spoken in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit,
Amen.

Preached at the Eucharist

St Bartholomew's Dinard

11th October, 2009

H: Sermon 20: Way Forward

