

Sermon 15th May 2022 9.30am Parish Eucharist with Baptism

Invocation

This Sunday is a very special day for Finlay Chambers as he enters into the family of the church through baptism. I wonder which of the three main symbols he will remember the most? Will it be the water poured onto his head? Or perhaps the lighted candle at the end? Maybe he will not like oil being signed on his forehead!

Who knows but he will certainly experience his baptism in his own unique way! And we will all remember what has happened, and for posterity his name, as well as parents and Godparents, will be recorded in the parish registers, a few years behind that of his big sister Tilly.

I wonder what we can remember of our own baptisms? Or have been told about them? I wonder if you have anything to remember them by? A candle? Or certificate?

As we journey through the Easter Season we are looking at the Five Marks of the Mission of the Church of Christ to help us in our reflections of what it means to be an Easter people but also how our new Parish centre might help us to be more fully the People of God in this place.

This Sunday we are looking at the second mark of mission – To teach, baptise and nurture new believers, and thanks to Finlay we get to see the start of this process first hand!

As it would happen, our reading from the Acts of the Apostles is bang on topic as well. In it we hear Peter teaching the church in Jerusalem about how the gift of the Holy Spirit had been given even to the Gentiles (and for the full story just read chapter 10).

If you will, this sermon is teaching, about teaching in the New Testament, about the teaching, baptising and nurturing of new believers. We might call these new believers disciples, which literally mean – the one who learns!

This year at St John's we are doing a lot of teaching and baptising new believers. So far there are 20 people booked in for baptism this year. Yet as I say in my preparation course, baptism is not the end of the journey but merely the beginning. As a reminder of this the Font is located near the entrance to church, as a reminder that baptism is entry into the church, and there will be many stages on the journey of faith.

This year we have seen, or are planning to celebrate, different people taking new steps in their journey of faith. In February we welcomed 5 young people to Holy Communion, in June we will celebrate 3 adults getting confirmed and in July Anthony Davis, who some of you know, will be ordained Deacon. Who knows what the rest of the year has in store? At each stage there will be plenty of teaching and nurturing.

These steps on the Way are some of the more formal parts on the journey. Yet we are always on a journey, as is life, and this journey doesn't end at Confirmation or ordination! Each of us needs to have regular times of teaching and nurture in our faith if we are to keep our faith alive and well, and not just on a Sunday morning.

The reality is that we are really limited in space at the moment to enable this nurture and teaching to take place, especially now that we have more going on across the week. Yes we have a beautiful church, but our parish centre is less to be desired.

I believe that the new parish centre has the potential to really enable our teaching and nurturing of those new to faith and not so new to faith. We will have the ability to organise study days in a comfortable environment, hold movies nights, even try out new forms of church that might appeal to people in different ways. It will give us new ways to live out our faith, and nurture others in living it out too.

The Holy Spirit is at work in Southdown already, even outside the Church. The Spirit goes where it pleases. In Acts of the Apostles the context for Peter's meeting with the church in Jerusalem was that he sat down to eat with Gentiles – something it wasn't safe for him to do – it made him unclean to worship God. That the Gentiles might be called to be part of the church was not even on the agenda!

Yet God had other plans. It was not that God approved of what happened – but that it started at all in the first place! It was God who initiated it.

So it is with Project Phoenix. I believe that this project was not initiated by a committee of St John's, or the megalomania of the Vicar, but by God, and it is our job to let God work through us.

Today we celebrate Finlay being baptised and God at work in Him as something brought about by God.

In Acts, the passage also ends with the celebrating that God's will had been done, upon hearing the witness of seven people.

So might we celebrate that God's will is being done not just today, but in the future when the Parish Centre is complete.

Amen.