

It's a delight to be welcoming Ryan into the Christian family today. We will be proclaiming Ryan beloved, chosen by God to be God's own for ever. Baptism is the mark of the beginning of our lives as Christians, the date when we throw ourselves, or are thrown, into God, into God's love and life.

Whenever we have the huge privilege of joining with an individual, or a child brought by their parents, for baptism, we are taken into the heart of what it means to be a Christian, and invited to recommit ourselves to the life of a disciple. It's really appropriate to do that as we settle into the season of Lent, a time of penitence, turning back to God, reorientating ourselves to the way our lives are meant to be.

So, what does it look like to be a Christian - what *is* a Christian? This is an important question for Ryan, and for his parents, as they set out on the Christian life together. It's the most important question for all of us here today: there is no more important question, if we believe the Christian life is the most authentic way of living, a way of living which is not just for today or tomorrow, but for all eternity. What is the way to eternal life?

The first thing to say is that it's offered to everyone. No one - but no one - is excluded.

The second is that it's free, but it costs everything. In other words, you can't buy it, you can't earn it, you can't do anything which means that you can say "give it to me now, I've done what's required, I've paid what it costs." However, to get it costs everything you've got, because you have to give up everything to get it. Giving up everything means letting go of every last thing you might rely on to give you the life you want, to give you eternal life.

There's a foolish cartoon I saw very many years ago which I've always enjoyed. A man is hanging from a branch half way up a huge cliff. "Help" he cries. "Is there anyone there who can help me?" "Yes" answers God. "Thank goodness" says the man. "What shall I do?" "Let go of the branch" answers God. The man pauses, then calls out again, "Is there anyone else there?"

When Abraham and his wife Sarah were called by God to live their lives for him, and answered in obedience, following God's all to a new country, they wondered how it would all work out. What would be required of them to live into God's promises, for them and their descendants, their children, their children's children and so on through many generations? The answer, extraordinarily, was simply to trust, to have faith that God's purposes would work out, and therefore to have hope. And to act on that hope - by believing that they could have a child, although they were as Paul puts it rather harshly, as good as dead. Hope against hope, as Paul says in his letter.

And this hope, this faith that God's purposes would work out, was reckoned to him as righteousness. Righteousness, being right with God, is the goal of all our lives, the way to eternal life. It's not about living our own lives in a way that we hope will please God. It's not about trying to make sure we believe the right thing. It's about living God's life as God works out God's purposes in all of us - immersing ourselves in it and allowing God to carry us forward, like a river.

That sounds a straightforward task: to live trusting in God, and living the way God chooses. Somehow, though, we have a human tendency to keep making the story all about *us* - and as soon as we do that, we bring a *them* into the tale. That's because to be confident that we are righteous, we have a tendency to point to others who are not.

This takes us to the gospel, and Jesus' words to his disciples. Last week, Mary gave us a wonderful introduction to the gospel of Mark, and it's breathless, urgent Jesus. In last week's reading, we were told that Jesus went into the desert, away from human beings, to be tempted. In today's Gospel, Jesus is again tempted, this time by a human voice, but behind that voice is the same evil intent, to draw him away from God's plan. The twin rebuke in verses 32 and 33 is striking.

Peter, in the passage just before this, has identified Jesus as the Messiah, the Christ, the one who is to bring salvation to a people under occupation - and more than that, a people who are separated from God's purposes for them. Surely, one who has just been identified as the Messiah will triumphantly carry all before him, like Neo in the Matrix ... or whoever your favourite hero or super hero happens to be. And Peter's rebuke of Jesus is to demand that Jesus fulfils that caricature of a liberator. Who did he think he was, to rebuke the Messiah?

Yet Jesus is both human and divine, and this must have been as serious a temptation as anything he had faced. To bring in a kingdom with power, miracle, power of word and spirit - who could stand against him? Why would he not want to do that - Peter's revelation that he was the Christ may have been as much a revelation to Jesus, as to Peter, the time that Jesus himself realised the full truth of who he was - and with that, its implications.

What a twin revelation: God's way of salvation is something quite different to way of of popular culture. It is to come to where the people are in their brokenness and sin. It is to take on for himself the consequences of that turning and turning away from God, and offer it back to him on the cross. It is to overcome the separation of Humanity from God and each other, to achieve reconciliation by bring them together. It is to finally do what humanity and always been invited to do, to throw himself into God's arms, trusting that God will catch him.

Jesus says that this is what he must do - to give his life in service for humanity. That means taking humanity's pain, the consequences of our sin and those who have sinned against us - to join us in the place where we experience life as separation from God. And he challenges those who want to know the true path of life to do the same.

It sounds a tremendous paradox: those who want to save their life, must give it away. But it's true: those who give their lives to God by dedicating them to others will find that they have discovered the key to eternal life. This is righteousness - right living - to give ourselves to others and trust that God will prompt others to give themselves to us.

Which takes us, as so many things do these days, to Gaza, and to Ukraine. Ryan will be baptised in a font made from a boulder brought here from a hillside above Bethlehem. It's a very physical link to the origins of our faith, and today to the brokenness of the world which Jesus came to save. What does it mean, to trust God and live for Righteousness for the people of faith in Gaza right now? Yesterday we gathered here with over 300 people to mark the second anniversary of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. What does it mean, to pray for Ukraine, to live for Jesus in Ukraine?

It means hoping against hope. Staying open to the little things God does in our relationships with each other that makes a difference. The small acts of courage, of kindness, of self sacrifice. God can move mountains - but whilst we are waiting for God to do that, we can invite us to move us, small grains of sand ... but enough sand can make a mountain.

As we follow Jesus in the way of the cross, we follow him in a way that trusts that in giving our life for others, we will discover the truth that Jesus gave his life for us. We will find the truth of what life really means, the gift from God that restores us to good , life giving relationships with God and one another. This is the way of salvation. This is the way of eternal life life.

*Now to the one who by the power at work within us is able to accomplish abundantly far more than all we can ask or imagine, to God be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations, for ever and ever. Amen. Eph 3. 20,21*