

Sermon on Matthew 25: 31-46

To What End?

What a joy it is for us today to be present at the baptism of Paige and Cianna.

Baptism is always a special time, and this morning has been no different.

Before we know it, before we can respond, before we have any inkling of a truth beyond ourselves, God loves us.

No ifs, no buts, just love.

What a miracle it is!

I remember being a part of a baptism of two Iranian Christians in Botany Bay once.

It was pretty cold!

A windy Sunday morning, the ocean, the candidates dressed in white, and the church on the beach singing songs of praise to the servant King.

And they waded out into the water, and into the waters of new life they were plunged, and they came up new beings.

And a whole new life began, with a new way and direction, and a new family of faith as well.

It was all about love from beginning to end.

None of us can see love, just as none of us can see God.

Yet we know love is real because simply put we're people, human beings, and so we're relational.

Our lives make sense only in relationship to others.

We're simply built that way it seems.

You can't see the love parents have for their children, but you can see the consequences of it in care and nurture, in embrace and protection – as we've seen with Damien and Leah this morning.

You can't see the love of God that encircles the world, yet when the church is doing its job properly you should be able to see the consequences of it in care and compassion, in acts of grace and mercy, in the witness to the new life of Jesus all around.

'I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, I was in prison and you visited me', Jesus says, 'and what you did for the least of these brothers and sisters of mine you did for me.'

Today we have celebrated one of the most meaningful signs of God's love the church has to offer – baptism.

In a strange and wonderful way, the act of baptism itself somehow brings the love of God to fruition in a concrete sense in a moment in time.

It becomes something we *can* touch and something we *can* see, something tangible, yet eternal.

It is enacted through the pouring of water, an essential element for our bodily wellbeing and indeed the whole of creation.

And this water, this pouring and renewing, this plunging into the love of God, is a means of grace for us all, beginning in this time with Paige and Cianna.

Baptism somehow transcends the divide between the things of earth and the things of heaven, and brings them together powerfully in a way which draws us into the heart of God's love.

And so God's love is by sign and symbol poured over our heads and our lives, today in particular over Paige and Cianna.

And we are marked with the sign of the cross to remind us that we belong to Jesus forever.

For but a few brief moments, painted in broad brush strokes, baptism does indeed let us glimpse the love of God.

It is a great gift to be sharing in baptism today, as today is the last Sunday in the Christian year.

This is the end of another year of faith in the church.

Next Sunday is the first week of a new year as we enter into the season of waiting in Advent.

It will take us towards Christmas of course when we will celebrate another child born into the world, who was also the King of all.

A King who found power in service, strength in weakness, justice in mercy, love in self-giving.

Doesn't sound much like the kings we normally know.

In fact, it sounds pretty much the opposite mostly.

I remember being in Scotland once when we were visiting my Mother.

One day we were there her next door neighbour decided to give our kids a little impromptu history lesson over the fence...

Neighbour: 'Did you see the beautiful broken down abbey in town?'

Tom: 'Yes we did. But why is it broken down?'

Neighbour: 'You know it wasn't broken down until a nasty English King came up here and destroyed it all.'

King Jesus is all about building up where so often we want to tear down.

King Jesus calls us into the way of mercy and grace, where so often the world tells us to take for ourselves whatever the consequences.

And so on Christ the King Sunday, two little girls have been washed in the waters of grace.

Grace for them and grace for us.

What a blessing to us all!

And in so doing, we are all reminded by God that the end of this thing we call faith, its purpose if you like, is that we would die to the way of breaking down, and be born anew into the way of building up.

That we would die to the way of what Augustine called '*se incurvates se*', the self curved in on itself, and be born anew into Jesus' way of self-giving... for others.

The self enlarged by stretching beyond itself.

Servants in the service of the Servant King.

It is perhaps indicative of the nature of the Servant King Jesus that children play such a large part in the imaginative landscape of his teaching.

“Let the little children come to me and do not hinder them, for to such as these belongs the Kingdom of Heaven.” (Matthew 19: 14).

“Truly I tell you, unless you change and become like little children you will never enter the Kingdom of Heaven. Therefore whoever takes the humble place – becoming like this child – is the greatest in the Kingdom of Heaven. And whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me.” (Matthew 18: 3-5).

Doesn't sound that different to 'whatever you did for the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me... '.

None of this, you'll understand, has anything to do with what today we might call 'the innocence of children' or their supposed 'simplicity'.

These are modern inventions and unhelpful ones really in this context.

I trust I can count on the experience of any parent here today that 2 year olds can be the least innocent beings in the world!

In Jesus' day it was about their status, or lack thereof.

Children were invisible in Jesus' time outside their families, seen as nothing in the wider world of politics and society.

They were the most vulnerable, the most reliant beings of their age.

Many slaves had better status than children.

So of course it makes perfect sense that King Jesus, the King who made himself vulnerable to death on a cross, would point to them and say you must become like this to enter the Kingdom of heaven.

The first shall be last and the last first.

Perhaps most shocking of all, when you see a child, no status, no power, you see me.

Of all the injustice, poverty, callousness, political one upmanship, in the world today, it is still the children who suffer most from the consequences of decisions not of their making.

As a church, we do well to remember that the act of baptising children implies a broader responsibility to them beyond the act itself.

In our resolve to serve the servant King, we are to pour the waters of grace into any circumstance, be it political system, church structure, or community group, where the vulnerable are being injured or oppressed.

And as the cross of Jesus teaches us, this can be a costly business.

Yet it is a necessary one if we truly want to claim the name Christian.

‘What you did for the least of these brothers and sisters of mine’, Jesus tells the disciples, ‘... you did for me.’

This is the eternal perspective.

You can’t love Jesus, and ignore your neighbour, ignore the stranger, ignore the poor in your street, at the same time.

Jesus is your neighbour, Jesus is the stranger, Jesus is the person in need on the street you will next bump into.

To what end?

This thing called faith?

Not the self curved in on itself.

The self in service of the Servant King.

A couple of weeks ago when I was doing the children’s talk, some of you might remember that little Brayden answered a question about what it means to follow Jesus by saying, ‘let your love shine through’.

A couple of people have said to me since in different ways that if I hadn’t preached that day, the Gospel still would have been proclaimed!

Brayden preached to us all that day.

To what end?

‘Let your love shine through.’

The traditional definition of a sacrament which, for Protestants, means Holy Communion and Baptism, is ‘a visible sign of an invisible grace’.

Or, to put it more simply, a sacrament is ‘God’s love shining through’.

In the gift of Baptism, God’s love shines through into our material world, through material things like water.

We cannot see God, just as we cannot see love, yet there *are* some signs along the way.

God’s love shines through.

Jesus performed many of them, and was of course, in his death and resurrection the greatest of them all himself.

It is into this same death and resurrection that Paige and Cianna have been baptised today.

Into this same death and resurrection that our lives are enfolded, day by day.

Into the same death and resurrection that our faith and being find their true end all our days, and forevermore.

To be a people of the Kingdom, we need to be a people of the King.

At the end of the Christian year we ask, ‘To what end?’?

King Jesus answers our question.

‘I was hungry and you fed me, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you took me in, I was naked and you clothed me, I was sick or in prison and you visited me.’

When Lord, did we do these things?

‘Whatever you did for the least of these brothers and sisters of mine you did for me.’

Or in Brayden’s memorable and telling words, ‘Let your love shine through.’

Here we stand at the end of the year, waiting for a new time to begin.

In Paige and Cianna's baptism today we've been given a glimpse into what that new time will demand...

...to what 'end' our faith is lived and breathed.

Like Brayden's words this has been God's work beginning to end, God's sign, God's love.

And we've been privileged enough to be here to witness it...

As it turns out, perhaps once more, you really didn't need me to preach at all.

Amen.