

Sermon on Colossians 3: 12-17
God's Election Campaign

So it's election time as we're all painfully aware.

Eight weeks of non-stop media analysis, sound bites, politicians taking painstakingly contrived photo-ops, and of course the ubiquitous polls.

The longest campaign in living memory we're told and it certainly feels like it.

I inwardly groan a little every time I see another politician in a high viz vest.

It's like a merry-go-round at a fair which never stops, the ride just keeps going round and round until eventually you feel pretty sick.

There are controversies and 'gotcha' moments, promises and commitments, and all of it seems to be part of the drama we come to expect of our national debate these days.

Some of it is edifying, much of it banal.

Do we come out of it at the other end any better informed or more rounded as a people?

Does our identity get shaped in loving and compassionate ways as a result?

I'm not so sure.

Much of it seems to reflect the very pathologies which trouble us most as a society – greed, self interest, parochialism and the insatiable appetite for self creation.

We all play our part in this rather skewed view of what matters.

We watch the coverage we buy the newspapers even if it's only to disagree with them.

Perhaps a little self reflection is in order as well at this time of national navel gazing.

What gives us our identity and frames our being and gives us hope in a world of multiple messages and diversions?

In contrast today we've taken the time as a community of faith to affirm a different kind of election in Will's baptism.

A different identity with a different foundation and a different set of messages.

God's election campaign begins in the love for the world and all its people.

When Paul writes to the Colossians in the passage we've heard today he says something extraordinary which may not immediately register with our modern ears.

He addresses them as 'God's chosen ones, holy, and beloved.'

These descriptions were reserved for Israel in the Old Testament.

Israel was the light to the nations, the chosen, the elect, the beloved.

Israel carried the promises of God which spoke of the new creation and the restoration of all things, of the Day of the Lord, of the time when God would make all things right through the Messiah.

It was God's covenant with Israel that shaped all of the OT narrative.

So, for Paul to describe the Christian believers at Colossae, almost wholly Gentiles, with these same words was truly radical. It would have shocked them.

It was like saying, these promises made to the people of old are now your promises too.

This identity is now your identity.

This call to be a light to the world is now your light.

Today as we have baptised Will we have affirmed that he is part of God's chosen, holy, and beloved people, not because he has chosen God, but because God has chosen him.

He has received his new clothes, his new identity.

He is part of God's election campaign of love to the world.

How does all this come about?

He has been baptised into Jesus Christ and nothing is the same again.

Baptism is more about the promises God makes to us than anything we say or do.

It's a gift.

A grace and it is open to all through faith.

Just before the passage we've heard today Paul says, 'Here there is no Gentile or Jew, circumcised or uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave or free, but Christ is all, and is in all.'

Election has always been a tricky business in the church. It's a theologically problematic idea, though clearly biblical.

John Calvin the 16th C Reformer thought that God drew the dividing line down between people – some in, some out – in an eternal decision.

Yet many coming after him questioned this thought.

How could a loving God decree before people were born that they were out of the covenant forged in Christ?

It didn't seem right or just and God could never be the author of anything that was unjust, that would be against the very nature of God.

Karl Barth reconfigured the doctrine by suggesting that election was in the first place about who God is, it was about God's very nature in Trinity.

For Barth, Jesus was the elect human and the electing God all in one.

Jesus is the new Israel, in the flesh, the chosen of God sent to save all the world, sent to be a light to the nations.

All humanity is bound into Jesus as God sends him among us, as the word takes on human flesh.

At the same time Jesus is the Son of God who freely chooses to be with us, for us, and to lay down his life for all.

Jesus is both the subject of election, the one who chooses, and the object of election, the one who is chosen.

And holding these things together, Barth was able to avoid the negative connotations of Calvin's doctrine.

While at the same time strengthening the church's understanding of God as a God whose election campaign is one of love for all.

Jesus chose love, and was chosen in love, in order that all of us, and little Will today would be gathered in love into God's family – adopted as heirs of Abraham's promise – as Paul writes in another place.

So when we baptised Will a few moments ago, we affirmed that God was wrapping his loving arms around him, that Jesus, the electing God had chosen him, and been chosen for him.

And this in order that he may one day come to be aware of how and why God has chosen to love him, and, we pray, respond in humble faith so as to live out the purposes of God in his own life through the power and leading of the Holy Spirit.

Not everyone agrees with Barth's approach, but I have to say I find it pretty compelling.

As William Willimon says, 'Barth responded to his critics by simply saying that a God who is not gracious from the very first is not the God revealed in Jesus Christ.'

Good retort.

'We love because God first loved us.', you can't begin anywhere else.

All of us are caught up in God's election campaign.

God wants so much more than political power for a time.

God wants, calls, a people who will live out their identity as the elect of Christ thereby witnessing to the love which is at the heart of all God is and does.

God wants our hearts our lives, in order to give us a future that never fades or spoils.

And without having to, God freely chooses to love us, no coercion, just a free act of grace for troubled, difficult, awkward, broken people like us.

Chosen, holy, and beloved of God.

God's election campaign turns out to be a little different from our regular political types.

God wants to frame the debate alright, to inspire our lives, to offer us a vision of a greater reality beyond ourselves, but it's not built on sound bites and photo-ops.

It's built on an outpouring, just like the water pouring over Will's head, an embracing, a giving act.

It's based on nothing more and nothing less than God's divine will to be in relationship with us and never to let any of us go.

Chosen, holy, and beloved of God, these are the Bible's words for relationship.

But the election campaign doesn't end there.

Chosen we may be, but for what, we might ask?

What purpose?

What end?

Elected to do what exactly?

'Jobs and growth', 'A fair go for all'? Billboards and political advertising?

Well, again, Paul tells us pretty clearly.

Be a community of Christ he says.

Clothe yourself with compassion and kindness and humility and gentleness and patience.

Forgive each other as you have been forgiven.

Sing hymns and psalms and songs of the Spirit.

Admonish and teach each other.

And over it all put on love which binds everything together.

Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts.

The open secret of God's election campaign is that we are chosen for the sake of others rather than ourselves.

For the sake of the world – with love to the world.

Will's baptism today is God's way of gathering people on the hustings, it's God's soapbox to deliver a message, God's canvass to paint, God's bullhorn to rally the troops.

Baptism makes no sense outside of the community of Christ.

We're not baptised on our own, but in the company of the baptised.

And each of us are reminded of our own baptism, our own election in Christ through Will's baptism today.

He is a gift to us before he's even aware of it such is the glory of God's love.

Our being chosen, holy, and beloved is for the sake of others, but the back story is that it is in being for others, loving others, that we realise the deepest sense of who we are meant to be, of who we have been elected to be.

It is in giving, as an old saint of the church once said, that we truly receive, in dying that we're born to eternal life.

This is our party's platform and our God's way of being which is to be reflected in God's own community.

So Paul tells the Colossians, 'whatever you do in word or deed, do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.'

Sometimes people like to ask the question, 'WWJD', but that's a bit tricky because we're not Jesus and it's not always clear what he would have done – sometimes he got angry, sometimes he was gentle, sometimes he was harsh, sometimes he was silent etc.

Perhaps a better question in line with Colossians 3 is to ask, 'Can we do this in Jesus' name?', can we say this, 'In Jesus name?', 'Can we live this, in Jesus' name?'

It won't make everything clear, but maybe it can be something of a guide for God's elect who have been chosen in Jesus, which is each one of us, and many, many more, all the way to the Presbyterian Church of South Sudan.

God's election campaign has been underway since before time, God never tires of it apparently.

And long after our current politicians step off the stage, God will continue to elect people like you and me and through baptism and the life of the community in Christ, speak to the world of the deep, deep love of Jesus, just as he has in little Will, his parents, and all of us here today.

And I trust that in God's mercy, we can indeed say and do and believe all this, in Jesus' name. Amen.