

“Infant and adult baptism – grace and faith” a sermon preached at Knox Church Dunedin New Zealand on 27 September 2020 by Kerry Enright.

We are about to baptise Henry James Blain aged 5 months old. So I want to talk about baptism. A little while ago, we baptised an adult. Whether we baptise infants or adults, the same theology applies. What does the church say about baptism? In summary, baptism marks the commencement of Christian life. In being plunged into the water and rising from it, we proclaim that the person is united with Christ in his dying and in his rising, the dynamic of our everyday living. The person enters into the life of being cleansed from sin and of receiving the life-giving spirit, the dynamic of our everyday living. The person is welcomed into God’s new society of love, the Church. Baptism marks the start of a faith journey toward God’s coming renewal of all things, the whole of creation. That is a summary of key aspects of the meaning of baptism.

You will know that some churches baptise infants and some don’t. The Roman Catholic and Orthodox – the two largest strands of the Church do baptise infants. Many Protestant churches baptise infants but Baptist, independent, evangelical and Pentecostal churches generally don’t. There are some within our own tradition who oppose infant baptism.

So let’s look at both practices, infant baptism first. We believe that God loves us and all people, and that we and all people are claimed for God’s service from birth. With infant baptism, the emphasis is on God’s initiative. It conveys God’s love for us before we can respond. It demonstrates that even when we are helpless, at whatever age, we are loved, accepted and affirmed by God. It celebrates God’s love for Henry and every child. Nothing we do can earn God’s love. Nothing we do can take God’s love from us. God’s acceptance of us does not depend on our faithfulness.

Infant baptism celebrates God’s welcome of a child into a faith community that takes responsibility for helping children mature in faith. It celebrates the beginning of a process of growing into Christ as part of a supportive community of faith. Our intent as a congregation is that one day Henry will declare his intention to live as a disciple of Jesus.

So in infant baptism, we affirm the faith of the community of faith, including the faith of the parents. Baptism is a sign of human solidarity, that at no stage of life are we meant to be isolated from each other or from God. We celebrate the grace of God who draws us deeply into relationship and seeks to form a new community of faith. We celebrate our life in family and in community.

In the process, we celebrate God’s patient pursuit of every person. I was baptised at the age of 18 but looking back, I have no doubt God had been pursuing me for years. There were moments of awakening and preparation. I am grateful that God was patient with me, never giving up, until I made my public response in due time. Before we are conscious of it, faith is being planted in us, because faith works at a level deeper than consciousness, deeper than our intellectual capacity. Faith cannot be limited to what happens in our minds. I remember visiting a congregation in Hungary where children who were intellectually disabled were being prepared for professing their faith. They may well have appreciated more about faith than I ever will.

The Holy Spirit is at work in our lives long before we recognise her. The Holy Spirit works in the lives of infants and children through parents, grandparents, teachers, friends and a faithful congregation and more. And the call to the congregation is to care for, nurture and guide children. Every baptism asks us whether our life as a congregation is enabling people to grow as disciples of Jesus. We are committing ourselves to being a multi-generational congregation, to point beyond the family circle, and beyond the local church to God's love for the world.

The emphasis is on God's initiative. But there are people who raise concerns about infant baptism. One of the important theologians of the last century, Karl Barth, opposed the practice, for three reasons. He said that infant baptism didn't figure in the Bible and so has no biblical authority. Strictly speaking he may be right. Although there is reference to households being baptised, it seems that the baptism of children started in the second century. But although it may not be specifically authorised in the Bible, it quickly became widespread.

He also argued that infant baptism has led to the disastrous assumption that people become Christians virtually by birth, that we are born Christians. Barth argued that this watered down the Christian faith and contributed to the church's lack of distinctiveness in society. If we become Christian at birth, there is nothing new about being Christian. The church is meant to be an alternative society of radical love, offering the world a different perspective. Now, Barth was writing in a time and in a context when national churches had been taken over by destructive popular values. In that context, infant baptism was abused, but so have many doctrines and practices of the church, yet we continue with them.

The third argument. Baptism has two sides to it - there is first an action of God – baptism with the Spirit – and then a corresponding human action – baptism with water. We celebrate both a divine gift and a human response. We celebrate the gift of God's life with us and we celebrate the beginning of a new life in Christ. Barth argues that infant baptism emphasises the first, but neglects the second. The Christian faith is certainly about God's unmerited love, he says, but it is also about making a free and glad human answer to that.

It is a free gift but that gift is not for filing away. We are baptised once because Christ died for us once and for all, but baptism is for living out, day by day, week by week, year by year. We are to live a baptised life. Now all of that is perhaps more evident in adult baptism. But as there are risks with infant baptism, so are there with adult baptism. The risk of adult baptism is that it can seem that faith comes before grace, our commitment comes before God's love of us. And it carries the risk of making faith individualistic, of making it about my faith, my relationship with God, whereas Christianity is fundamentally a communal faith. We grow in faith as part of a community, as a member of the body of Christ.

I think it is important to hold both practices together, to note what each contributes, and to note dangers with each. Two dimensions, to be held together. Grace and faith. Beginning and continuing, which is the point of the gospel reading today.

We are a congregation that celebrates infant and adult baptism. One is not better than the other. They have the same underlying theology, God's love, God's patient pursuing of us, calling for human response, every day of our lives.