

For the first two years of my ministry I worked alongside a wonderful priest and pastor of the Church of Ireland, the late Canon Cecil Wilson. He was a fund of anecdotes, rooted in his own experiences of life and ministry in the Parishes he served in rural Ireland as well as the city. One of his many stories came to mind as I was reflecting on this morning's service. In the course of this month we are going to have a number of Baptisms and I just want to think a bit about what we are doing in Baptism.

This is where Cecil Wilson's particular anecdote came to my mind. He was recalling his time in the Parish of Templeharry. The Bishop was visiting one Sunday and in the Vestry expressed some disappointment that there has been no marriages in the Parish for a number of years. The Sexton grabbed Cecil's sleeve and said in a stage whisper; 'Mr Wilson, Mr Wilson, tell him about all the Baptisms!'

The Baptisms that had happened were clearly events worthy of as much mention to a Bishop as the weddings that hadn't.

That little anecdote reminds me that a Baptism is much more than a family event – though of course there will be celebrations in the Dummer family home as friends and family join with Mum and Dad to share this wonderful day, the baptism of their son Ruari. It is an event of significance for the whole Parish. So, while in times past Baptisms were celebrated privately with just family and invited guests in attendance, we have in recent times reverted to the practice of Cranmer himself in setting the service in the context of public worship.

It is an occasion for us as a Parish community to encourage the families with our presence and our prayers. An occasion also, as we hear the promises being made, to reflect on our own ongoing response to the promises of our own Baptism and Confirmation.

The pastoral introduction to the Service of Baptism in the Book of Common Prayer begins: ‘Baptism marks the beginning of a journey, which continues for the rest of our lives, our first step in our response to God’s love.’

Our Christian life is indeed a journey of response to God’s love. It is a journey of a lifetime and the questions that are asked are questions asked of people on a journey, not of people who have arrived, not of people who have got it all sorted.

It is with this idea of our Baptism as the beginning of a journey at the back of our minds, that I want to go on and reflect on the Old Testament and Gospel passage set for today, along with the Collect of this 4th Sunday after Trinity.

In the Old Testament passage, the leaders of the nation have come to David to ask him to assume the mantle of Kingship, following the death of Saul. This is the beginning of a long reign, something of a golden age for the people of Israel. It was to be a reign marked by successes and failures; times of great faithfulness, times of abject weakness and failure. But all lived out in response to the call that God had placed upon him.

Our Gospel reading tells of Jesus sending out his disciples in pairs. And so at the very beginning of their discipleship (certainly not benefitting from any programme of training), they embark upon a journey of witness and service. Sometimes they will get it right, sometimes they will get it wrong; sometimes they will understand what Jesus is about; sometimes it will be clear they have lost the plot.

So whatever the fallible frailty of humanity; be it that of David or that of the disciples, God works in and through people. But by the same token, while God does work in and through people his purposes are not ultimately frustrated by the weaknesses and failings, the idiosyncrasies of men and women like you and me. God works in and through us, sometimes despite us in the advancement of his Kingdom.

So today and on other occasions over these next few weeks we will be welcoming in baptism new companions on the journey of faith.

Matthew tells us of the final commission of the Risen Christ to his disciples, ‘Go into all the world’ And with that commission is the promise, ‘I am with you always’. In Baptism and in Confirmation we follow in the steps of those first disciples as we hear and respond to that great commission, ‘Go into all the world ...’ - into the shops and schools, into the homes and streets where we live, into our places of work and recreation – Go in the name of Christ, bearing something of the love and the presence of Christ. And with it comes that same promise, to us and to the children we Baptise; ‘I am with you always – to the very end of time.’ He is with us, always, everywhere. He is with us in our successes and our failures; with us when we get it right, strengthening and affirming. He is with us when we get it wrong, speaking to our hearts and minds words of words of correction and challenge, words of forgiveness and encouragement. He is with us leading us further on into a deeper understanding of God’s love for us and his purpose in our lives.

And so with confidence we can pray the Collect of this 4th Sunday after Trinity:

O God, the protector of all who trust in you,
without whom nothing is strong, nothing is holy:
Increase and multiply upon us your mercy;
that with you as our ruler and guide,
we may so pass through things temporal
that we finally lose not the things eternal:
Grant this, heavenly Father,
for Jesus Christ’s sake, our Lord.