

Over this season of Lent, we have been thinking around the topic of membership using the Church of Ireland Service of Baptism as a framework for our thoughts. One thread that has been running through our reflections has been the whole idea of ‘journey’.

Life is a journey, a journey from birth to death, a journey of discovery, of learning. Faith is a journey, a journey of a lifetime, a journey undertaken with Christ, a journey into Christ. A feature of this journey is that there is always more ahead, more to learn, more to discover about life, about God, about myself; about what it means to live as ones made in the image of God, what it means to live as a member of the Body of Christ.

We thought of the promises of Baptism, those great questions of solemn commitment. There are those questions asked of parents and godparents about the upbringing of their child, that they will provide an environment within which faith is fostered and encouraged. There is that question asked of the congregation, the wider Church family, that we will welcome, that we will encourage.

Then there are those questions that lie at the heart of Baptism and Confirmation. At Baptism these are made by parents and godparents on behalf of the child. At confirmation these questions are asked of the young people themselves. On the 2nd Sunday after Easter it will be our joy and privilege to stand alongside our young people as they make these promises in their own name when they are confirmed by the Archbishop.

Do you reject the devil and all proud rebellion against God?
Do you submit to Christ as Lord?

These are questions not of people who have arrived, who have got it all sorted. These are questions of people on a journey, a journey of faith.

This morning we celebrate Palm Sunday. As our Gospel reading we have read St Luke's account of Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem. In the wider context of the Gospel account as a whole this is a crucial point on a journey that has taken him from the relative obscurity of Galilee through Samaria, and on to Jerusalem and to Calvary and death and resurrection. It has been a journey that has seen a gradually sharpening conflict between Jesus and the religious authorities of his day that will culminate in his trial and death on the cross.

In the prayer over the water at Baptism (I have printed this in the text box on your lesson sheets), as water is poured into the font we recall God's journey with mankind; from creation, through the redemption of the people of Israel from slavery in Egypt, to Jesus' own birth, his Baptism by John and his death.

We give you thanks that through the deep waters of death Jesus
delivered us from our sins and was raised to new life in triumph.

We have a coming together here of two journeys – my journey and God's journey and the two come together in my encounter with the person of Jesus. I often find myself reflecting on words that Paul wrote in his letter to the Philippians. As I read it the image of a trek across country comes to my mind. you know the time you might come to a ditch and it is good to have someone on the other side who is there to reach across and help you over. I have that picture of Christ, hand outstretched helping me onward over whatever obstacles life puts in my path.

¹⁰ I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the sharing of his sufferings by becoming like him in his death, ¹¹ if somehow I may attain the resurrection from the dead.

¹² Not that I have already obtained this or have already reached the goal; but I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own. ¹³ Beloved, I do not consider that I have made it my own; but this one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, ¹⁴ I press on toward the goal for the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus. *Philippians 3:10-14*

The journey, as I say, is a journey of a life time. Christ leads us further on. And so the prayer over the water concludes:

We give you thanks for the grace of the Holy Spirit who forms us in the likeness of Christ and leads us to proclaim your Kingdom.

That we might be formed in the likeness of Christ. As we are reminded at the very outset of the Service of Baptism. ‘As children of God we have a new dignity and God calls us to fullness of life.’

That is the goal of our journey, our journey with Christ, our journey into Christ as we seek to make real in our own lives the injunction of Paul we find in our lesson from his letter to the Philippians:

⁵Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus,
⁶who, though he was in the form of God,
did not regard equality with God
as something to be exploited,
⁷but emptied himself,
taking the form of a slave,
being born in human likeness.
And being found in human form,
⁸he humbled himself
and became obedient to the point of death –
even death on a cross. *Philippians 2:5-8*

Or as the German martyr theologian of the Second World War, Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote in his book ‘The Cost of Discipleship’:

“It is only because he became like us that we can become like him.”