

Today, in the course of this Service of Baptism, I will go up to each of these children and will make the sign of the Cross on their foreheads and say:

Christ claims you for his own.

Receive the sign of the cross.

I just want to think through the significance of this simple ceremony, which at Disestablishment some wanted to drop from our service of Baptism. I want to do it in the context of not only the service but the lessons appointed for today.

Our Old Testament lesson (which we have not read but is on your sheet) continues the story of Moses, today focussing on his encounter with God in the story of the burning bush. That story encapsulates for me one of the defining definitions of God in the Old Testament story:

I have observed the misery of my people

I have heard their cry

I know their suffering.

This speaks to me of a God who is not remote from our lives, even in our darkest times. He is one who engages, who listens, who understands, who is the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.

It is this God to whom we draw near in worship, to whose service and protection we commit these two children this morning; to whom 14 of our young people will be pledging themselves in Confirmation in October.

I want this morning, in the context of our service, in the context of our Epistle and Gospel to reflect on the life to which we are all committed in Baptism and Confirmation and in which we are called to encourage one another.

In our Gospel reading, as Jesus has spoken of his own destiny and future suffering, he goes on to speak of the disciples' own vocation:

'If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. *Matt 16:24*

Let them deny themselves and take up their cross.

Receive the sign of the cross.

Our Epistle comes close to the end of Paul's Letter to the Romans. This is the most closely reasoned of all Paul's letters. In his other letters he was writing to Churches he had founded and in them he is responding to problems and issues that have been brought to his attention. This one is different – the Church in Rome was up and running long before Paul arrived. He was writing in advance of his arrival as a prisoner, coming to present his case to the Emperor. This is Paul stating his theological position on issues such as the position of the Jews in the overall plan of God; his understanding of the nature of the person and work of Jesus; here he states his own understanding of human nature as fallen and the atonement. It is heavy stuff and Paul is often regarded as a rather cold human being with little sympathy for human nature or for the place of women in the Church. But now towards the end he talks of the outworking of faith and another side to Paul comes into view. In a series of injunctions he gives us a wonderful vision of what it means to live as a Christian in this troubled and troubling world in which we find ourselves:

⁹Let love be genuine; hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good; be patient in suffering, persevere in prayer.¹⁴Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them. ¹⁵Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep. ¹⁶Live in harmony with one another;..... ¹⁷Do not repay anyone evil

for evil,¹⁸If it is possible, so far as it depends on you,
live peaceably with all. *Romans 12 (assorted verses)*

This outworking of faith brings me back to our Baptism, the symbolism of the
Cross as the emblem, the badge of our faith. (*produce the wooden cross*)

Take up your cross
Receive the sign of the Cross
(*dismantle the cross*)

The vertical and the horizontal

(*vertical*) My relationship with God

(*horizontal*) My relationship with my neighbour.

I will say to each child:

Live as a disciple of Christ
fight the good fight
finish the race, keep the faith

Take up your cross
Receive the sign of the Cross

The two aspects of my Christian life:

(*vertical*) my obedience

(*horizontal*) my service

(*vertical*) my worship

(*horizontal*) my witness

Re-assemble the cross

Take up your cross
Receive the sign of the Cross

We will all then say to these children:

**Confess Christ crucified,
proclaim his resurrection,
look for his coming in glory.**

May we, in all our imperfection, with the Cross of Christ imprinted on our brow, be living signs of the love of God in Christ in the lives of these children, that in us and through us God may draw them into his service.

Lord, accept the poverty of our faith,
the fragility of our obedience,
the imperfection of our service:

Take us and use us in the power of your Holy Spirit
that we may be living signs of your Kingdom in this place. **Amen**