

Sermon Epiphany 3/Ordinary Sunday 3 Year A 2023

With great joy, today we welcome little Arturo, who comes to be baptized into the faith of Christ and the life of the Church. We welcome his parents Christian and Nury, and his wider family. It is always a special moment in the life of the church when someone is baptised. It should never be something pedestrian or tedious for us. This is a moment of great significance! A moment of joy and of hope. In fact, it is the most important moment of Arturo's life! Because whatever else happens in his life, whatever happens at school, whatever hobbies he takes up, whatever job he lands himself, whatever his relationships, they are *temporal*. They are things of this world. But what happens today at the font in a few moments times leaves an indelible mark, an eternal mark. What happens at the font for little Arturo has *eternal* consequence.

Baptism is important, not only for Arturo, or any individual being baptised. It is important for the whole church. Because in part it is a sign we are in fact obeying Christ. What Christ has said we should do, we are doing. During our Eucharist today, when we take bread and wine, bless them and share them, likewise we are doing as Christ has commanded. When we lead someone to the waters of baptism, we are doing as Christ has commanded. The gospel reading placed before us today was from Matthew's gospel. And at the very end of his gospel, the very last verses, we hear Christ's command: *All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations baptising them in the name of the Father of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age.*

The gospel reading set for today from Matthew anticipates this command of Christ to go and baptize all nations. The calling of the first disciples - Peter and Andrew, James and John - is the very first public act of Jesus following his baptism by John and temptation in the wilderness. Jesus' own call to these fishermen points to the church's own mission to call and to make disciples. It is faithfulness to that mission that sees us here today. We are the result of that obedience.

It is important to remember, however, that responding to Christ's call is not a once for all affair. Oftentimes we think that by coming to the waters of baptism, the job's done. Or we give personal assent to faith in Christ, and think, 'well that's it, I have fulfilled what is required.' But this is to misunderstand the very essence of what it means to be

a Christian. In the gospel reading today, we hear Jesus' call to the first disciples: *follow me, and I will make you fishers of men*. 'To follow' is what *disciple* means. To be a disciple means to walk in the footsteps of another. It means to be moving, journeying. It means to be on the Way. Indeed, this was the first name given to the church, to the followers of Jesus. We were known as the people of the Way. Because faith is not static. And because believing in Jesus means believing in a Person, and none of our relationships are static.

And we note that when Jesus calls these men, they are *already* fishermen. Yet Jesus calls them to *become* fishermen. Today, we make Arturo a Christian. But we invite him to now *become* Christian. We gathered here today are already Christian. And we are called to *become* Christian. This is what it means to follow, to be a disciple: we are always in the process of *becoming*. So, Christian faith is not static. It is not a once for all moment. Because we are ever more journeying into the implications of the call.

One of the most important implications of growing into the call of Christ is that we are meant to share in the work of calling! Whatever our state of life, whatever our gifts or talents, wherever we find ourselves, with whatever resources we have at our disposal, we all meant in some way to share and extend Christ's invitation. It's very easy for us in the church today to imagine that this work is 'other people's business'. It is very easy to let ourselves off the hook and to professionalise the call. It is very easy to say it's the priest's job or the job of some other paid specialist. But it's not a job. It's part of what it means to be a faithful Christian. It is part of what it means to obey Christ.

Now, we get so used in western countries like Australia to hearing of reports about the decline of faith, about the lack of belief in our culture, how churches are a shadow of what they once were, that people no longer find meaning in the things the church holds as true, that the biggest religious demographic growth is amongst the 'nones', those who espouse no formal religious belief. In part, yes, this is true, but only partially true. I oftentimes seek to remind that globally the situation is much different. But for sure, in our context, Christian faith is certainly in decline.

How important, then, to remind ourselves of Jesus' call and of his command! Jesus himself would have had no followers if he himself did not invite! Peter, Andrew James and John had to be intentionally invited! Little Arturo didn't wake up this morning

and ride his tricycle from Canberra to be here! His parents have *brought him* here recognising that this is a good thing to do, indeed a necessary thing to do!

Now, of its very nature, the Christian church is outward looking. It is universal in purpose and scope. Jesus didn't say 'preach the gospel to a handful of like-minded friends.' Or 'preach the good news to your own culture.' Instead, he said, *go therefore and make disciples of all nations*. And elsewhere in this gospel, he says that the very *gates of hell would not prevail* over the church he was founding. Through 2000 years, difficulties and setbacks have never been the end of the story. And so maintaining things as they are, managing decline, treading water is absolutely not what our Lord wants or expects! That approach in no way reflects the dynamic nature of being a disciple or the outward scope of Christ's command. Rather, he wants and expects every baptised person to share in the work of proclaiming his good news. Not just the professionally religious. But all the baptized. And that need not be as hard as we think.

Every regular churchgoer here, every household, should make it their goal and responsibility to invite another household to church in the coming year. Now, you do not need to be a mathematical genius to work out that would promptly double our congregation. And what a different 'game' we would be playing then! Every faithful mass goer here today will know of people who should be going to mass and aren't! Children, grandchildren, work colleagues, neighbours, those who were once faithful churchgoers but have simply drifted away, perhaps those who are angry or disappointed with the church. No matter! Identify these wandering sheep and make it your evangelical responsibility to invite them back. Because if you don't, then who will?

The next important thing we can do to fulfill our obligation to extend Christ's invitation is to pray. Scripture tells us, *nothing great is ever accomplished apart from prayer*. Yet I suspect we mostly fail in this and never even give it a thought. So, make it a special intention to pray for the expansion of the church, of this church! Ask the Lord - insistently, fervently, even stubbornly - to bring back his wandering sheep, and to bring new sheep into his fold. And here especially the elderly and housebound should seek to take on this specific task. This is a ministry they are especially suited to.

Christ continues to call people to faith in him. That we are here today - and what we *do* today - bears witness to this truth. But believing in Christ, following him, being his disciple, and being faithful to his call, means we too must extend his invitation. Amen.