

Sermon for Romsey Uniting Church

23rd of August 2009

During this past week I spent three days on retreat with other ministers from Port Phillip West Presbytery, the regional body that Romsey Uniting Church is part of. We spent those three days thinking about our ordination – how we ended up as ministers and what it actually means to be ordained. My ordination grew out of my baptism. Although I didn't realise it at the time, since I was only three months old, it was through my baptism that I became a minister. Every baptised Christian is called to ministry, to be the faithful witness and servant of Jesus Christ. Ordained ministry is just a particular way of living out that call.

All of us on the retreat shared with each other our call to ordination. So, when I later said that we were going to be baptising Callum this Sunday, some of the other ministers asked whether Callum was aware that this action might be the first stage on the road to becoming a reverend. I said I thought maybe we'd better not mention that!

I need to very quickly reassure Rachael and Michael that baptism does not automatically lead to ordination. But it is an important and life-changing moment. In baptism, Callum is received into the one holy catholic and apostolic Church and becomes a member of the family of Jesus Christ. Even though he won't remember it, today Callum is being reborn, and so we are gathered here to celebrate something that is in many ways as important as his birth.

Many things are happening to Callum in today's sacrament. Firstly, Callum is being washed and made clean. Baptism is a bath. Callum won't be asked any questions today, but his mother will, and the questions that Rachael will be asked before Callum is baptised are whether she repents of her sins, turns to Christ, and commits herself to God. This is because one of the things that baptism does is wash us clean of sin, the propensity that all humans have to turn away from God. We're all disposed to live lives that are selfish and egotistical and ignorant. This is part of being human. But in baptism we're cleansed and changed. We're given our lives again, clean, fresh and new, free from everything that separates us from God. Baptism enables us to live out our lives as God's beloved children and true creation. Everything else is washed away in the waters of the font.

Of course, Callum is only a year old. I'd be very surprised if over the past year he's done any serious sinning or turning from God. But the cleansing that we do today will carry on throughout Callum's entire life. It doesn't mean that Callum won't have sins to repent of in the rest of his life. It *does* mean that he, like all of us, can be sure that whatever happens in the future his sins will be forgiven.

Secondly, Callum is becoming a member of a community, the church, both this small local gathering of Christians who will witness his baptism and promise to accompany him in his Christian life, and the entire holy, catholic and apostolic church throughout time and space. The reading we heard from Ephesians today reminds us of that: "There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to the one hope of your calling, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is above all and through all and in all." Today, Callum is joining that one body – not the Uniting Church, but the one church. In his baptism Callum becomes part of the family of Jesus Christ, which includes every Christian who has ever been baptised.

This is one reason that the baptismal service includes the Apostle's Creed, which later we will all be invited to stand and say together. This Creed has summed up the Church's faith from very early times. As we say it together it reminds us that Callum is becoming part of the community of everyone who has ever held these beliefs in every century and every country and every denomination.

Thirdly, baptism tells Callum who he is; the beloved child of God. It tells him who he belongs to; the sign of the cross that I will place on his forehead is like a brand, a mark of ownership. It tells Callum and everyone else that he belongs not to himself, and most definitely not

to anyone or anything else, but to God. When Jesus was baptised, God's voice was heard from the heavens saying to him: "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased." Today Callum is baptised into Jesus' baptism and God says the same words to him: "You are my beloved son; with you I am well pleased".

In this case, baptism is making explicit something that has always been true. Callum has been God's beloved child since before he was born. Today when we baptise Callum, we respond to the love that God has shown him from the very beginning. We baptise babies and children without asking them to make any promises because we recognise that in baptism, as in all else, the initiative lies with God. Callum's baptism is a response to God's call and God's love.

Fourthly, and most importantly, today Callum is baptised into both Jesus' death and into his life. Water, for the people of Israel, was about life and birth and cleansing, but first and foremost it was about death. The people of Israel were not a sea-going people; they preferred the safety of land. Water was chaos and destruction and death. Baptism, the submersion in water, is death by drowning. And then, having been symbolically drowned, we are raised to new life.

In baptism, Callum will die to all that Christ defeated on the cross: violence and oppression and hatred and darkness and death. He will be reborn to all that the resurrection brings to birth: peace and justice and love and light and life. In baptism Callum becomes a new creation, cleansed of his sins, welcomed into the church community, acknowledged as God's beloved son, alive in Christ. But despite its importance, Callum won't remember it. It's up to us, gathered here, to remember for him; to remind him of his baptism and what that means about who he is. Let us celebrate it and give thanks. Amen.