

Sermon for the combined Riddells Creek/ Mount Macedon Service

18th of January 2009

1 Samuel 3:1-10

Psalm 139:1-6, 13-18

John 1:43-51

Today, although she probably won't remember it, is a profoundly important day in Melissa's life. Today, she is marked with the sign of the cross. Today, she is received into the one holy catholic and apostolic Church. Today, she becomes a member of the family of Jesus Christ. Today Melissa is baptised, and we're gathered here to celebrate something that is in many ways as important as her birth.

Baptism is many things. It's an initiation, a coronation, a choice, an adoption, a washing, a gift, a death and a rebirth. There isn't time today to investigate everything that baptism means, so instead I'm going to quickly describe four things that the church believes are happening to Melissa today.

Firstly, Melissa is being washed and made clean. Baptism is a bath. Melissa won't be asked any questions today, but her parents will, and the questions that Visnja and Darren will be asked before Melissa is baptised are whether they repent of their sins, turn to Christ, and commit themselves 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, Melissa is only a year old. I'd be very surprised if over the past year she's done any serious sinning or turning from God. But the cleansing that we do today will carry on throughout Melissa's entire life. It doesn't mean that Melissa won't have sins to repent of in the rest of her life. It *does* mean that she, like all of us, can be sure that whatever happens in the future her sins will be forgiven.

Secondly, Melissa is becoming a member of a community, the church, both this small local gathering of Christians who will witness her baptism and promise to accompany her in her Christian life, and the entire holy, catholic and apostolic church throughout time and space. In her baptism Melissa 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 Melissa is becoming part of the community of everyone who has ever held these beliefs in every century and every country and every denomination. After her baptism, Melissa will be carried through the congregation so that the members of this small local gathering of Christians can greet her as their sister in Christ. From today, Melissa is sister to every Christian in the world. She gains over two billion brothers and sisters. Fortunately, she doesn't have to buy Christmas presents for all of them.

Thirdly, baptism tells Melissa who she is; the beloved child of God. It tells her who she belongs to; the sign of the cross that I will place on her forehead is like a brand, a mark of ownership. It tells Melissa and everyone else that she belongs not to herself, 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 Melissa is baptised into Jesus' baptism and God says the same words to her: "You are my beloved daughter; with you I am well pleased".

In this case, baptism is making explicit something that has always been true. Melissa has been God's beloved child since before she was born. As today's psalm tells us, it was God who formed Melissa and knit her together in her mother's womb. Today when we baptise Melissa, we respond to the love that God has shown her 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. Just as God called Samuel, so God has called Melissa here today. Melissa's baptism is a response to God's call and God's love.

Fourthly, and most importantly, today Melissa 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, Melissa will die to all that Christ defeated on the cross: violence and oppression and hatred and darkness and death. She will be reborn to all that the resurrection brings to birth: peace and justice and love and light and life. In baptism Melissa becomes a new creation, cleansed of her sins, welcomed into the church community, acknowledged as God's beloved daughter, alive in Christ. This is why today is such an important day in her life, even though she will probably not remember it. So let us celebrate it and give thanks. Amen.