

**Sermon for Romsey
14th of June 2009**

Ezekiel 36:25-28

Ephesians 4:1-6

Matthew 5:1-12

Today, we baptise Makayla Eunice Horder. We've gathered to celebrate this joyful event, and to support Rachael and Cameron and Shelley and Spencer as they make the deep commitment to help Makayla become part of the Christian community, with all that that will mean for her life. We've also gathered to bear witness to Makayla's baptism, so that as she grows up we can share our memories of it with her, always reminding her and reassuring her that she is the beloved daughter of God.

All baptisms are rich with meaning. The baptism of adult believers reminds us that baptism doesn't automatically follow the arrival of a baby; it's a serious, deep commitment to living a Christian life. The baptism of children like Makayla reminds us that baptism is unearned, that God's love is the initiating agent and ours the response. Baptism is about love, and the baptism of babies makes that obvious. Babies don't ask for birth and they don't ask for the rebirth that is baptism; both happen because of the great love that their parents feel for them, the great love that is a reflection of the love of God for us all. It's in response to this love that Makayla is baptised today. We're gathered here to celebrate a rebirth 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 Makayla today.

Firstly, Makayla is being washed and made clean. Baptism is a bath. Makayla won't be asked any questions today, but her parents will, and the questions that Rachael and Cameron will be asked before Makayla 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. Through the prophet Ezekiel, God told the people of Israel: "I will sprinkle clean water upon you, and you shall be clean from all your uncleannesses". We're given our lives again, clean, fresh and new, free from everything that separates us from God. A new heart is given to us and a new spirit put within us. 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, Makayla is very young. I'd be very surprised if over the past eight or so months she's done any serious sinning or turning from God. But the cleansing that we do today will carry on throughout Makayla's entire life. It doesn't mean that Makayla 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, Makayla 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 Makayla 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 Makayla is becoming part of the community of everyone who has ever held these beliefs in every century and every country and every denomination. And this is why I've asked Rev. Paul Walton, from the Centenary Uniting Church in Brisbane, to ask the questions which we will answer with the Apostle's Creed. Makayla is not just becoming a member of the Romsey Uniting Church, where I minister; but a member of the one, holy catholic and apostolic church, of which Paul is also a minister. The Apostle Paul writes to the Ephesians: "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 Makayla becomes a member of that one body, sister to every Christian in the world.

Thirdly, baptism tells Makayla 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 Makayla 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 Makayla 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. Makayla has been God’s beloved child since before she was born. Today when we baptise Makayla, 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. Makayla’s baptism is a response to God’s call and God’s love.

Fourthly, and most importantly, today Makayla 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, Makayla 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. She becomes part of the community called to be merciful and pure in heart and meek and poor in spirit, the community of peacemakers and those who hunger and thirst for righteousness. It is an awesome calling, an incredible mission, and for Makayla it all starts today.

In baptism Makayla 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.