

Sermon for Romsey The Sixth Sunday of Easter, 9th of May 2010

Recently, I inherited a collection of books from my grandmother. One of them was *Etiquette and Entertaining: To Help You on your Social Way*, written by Lady Troubridge in 1939. I'm not sure whether my grandmother ever used its advice on 'The Etiquette of Leaving Cards' or 'How to Give a Little Cocktail Party' (I must ask her) but I've been having a lot of fun reading through it. One of the chapters in which the author helps the reader on their social way is 'The Etiquette of Christenings'. It starts: "A child is generally christened from four to six weeks after it has arrived in the world. This, its first public appearance, is a very important little ceremony".¹ When I read this I almost spat out my coffee. I love baptising babies, as you may have noticed, but one of the reasons I appreciate baptising people like Ash, who've made the decision to be baptised themselves, is that we're reminded that what we're doing here today is *not* a 'little ceremony' in which a baby makes their 'first public appearance'. Baptism is much, much more important than that.

For much of the past 2000 years, Christianity was the official religion of the West and belonging to the church was equated with belonging to society. When it was assumed that everyone was Christian, baptism was almost completely limited to infants and it was a social ritual as much as a religious one. But today, when we live in a multicultural and multi-faith society, when it can't be assumed that everyone belongs to the church, we're in a similar situation to the early Christians, in the first three or four centuries of this era, when becoming a Christian through baptism was a deliberate and brave choice. So we have a lot to learn from the way baptisms happened in the early church.

For the first several hundred years after Christ baptism happened after a period called the 'catechumenate'.² The catechumenate taught candidates for baptism what it means to be Christian, and the emphasis was on changing people's lives; enabling them to *live* as Christians, not merely to believe as Christians.

The most important source we have for this process comes from the third century in a book called the *Apostolic Tradition* written by Hippolytus of Rome. Hippolytus tells us that if people had heard about Christianity from existing Christians, and wanted to join the church, the first thing that happened was that their way of life was examined. They couldn't be in a profession like acting or the military or prostitution, because that would prevent them from living a Christian life. If their way of life was okay, they began the catechumenate and learnt about the faith for about three years. The early church thought it took people about three years to really get into the habit of living as Christians.³

At the end of those three years, as people approached baptism, the church was interested not so much in what they knew as in how they were living out their faith. Hippolytus wrote:

And when those who are to receive baptism are chosen, let their life be examined: have they lived good lives when they were catechumens? Have they honoured the widows? Have they visited the sick? Have they done every kind of good work? And when those who brought them bear witness to each: 'He has', let them hear the gospel.⁴

The church continued to be concerned about the way people lived. In the fourth century the behaviour of the candidate for baptism was still examined:

He who presents him attests that he has been zealous for the commandments during the time of his catechumenate, that he has visited the sick or given to

¹ Lady Troubridge, *Etiquette and Entertaining: To Help You on your Social Way* (1939), p. 137.

² Karen Ward, 'Making Adult Disciples: Rites for our times', *The Christian Century*, 116 (1999), pp. 348.

³ Quoted in Maxwell E. Johnson (ed.), *Documents of the Baptismal Liturgy*, 3rd Edition (London: SPCK, 2003), p. 5.

⁴ Quoted in Maxwell E. Johnson (ed.), *Documents of the Baptismal Liturgy*, 3rd Edition (London: SPCK, 2003), p. 6.

the needy, that he has kept himself from every vain and disgraceful word, that he has hated vainglory, despised pride, and chosen for himself humility.⁵

In the late fourth century a Spanish nun called Egeria wrote about her pilgrimage to the Holy Land and described the way those who were to be baptised at Easter were instructed. Names were given to a priest on the first day of Lent; and on the second day of Lent the bishop asked the catechumens' neighbours about their behaviour: "Is this person leading a good life? Does he respect his parents? Is he a drunkard or a boaster?" He asks about all the serious human vices.⁶

We didn't ask Ash to spend three years in a catechumenate, learning about the faith. Nor have we asked him whether he's led a good life, whether he's visited the sick or respected his parents. The only things we ask him before he's baptised are whether he repents of his sins, turns to Christ, and commits himself to God. This is because we believe that baptism isn't something to be earned; it's initiated by God and is a sign of God's love for us. That's why we're happy to baptise babies who can't make any promises for themselves – in baptism it's God who offers, and we accept. So all Ash has to do in order to be baptised is to say 'yes' to the God who is offering. But then, once he's baptised, the church does ask him to make some responses.

This is where the church of today follows the practices of the early church. Being Christian isn't just about what we believe; it's also about what we do. So in response to his baptism we'll ask Ash to continue in the community of faith, the apostles' teaching, the breaking of bread and the prayers; to proclaim, by word and example, the good news of God in Christ; to seek Christ in all people, and love his neighbour as himself; and to strive for justice and peace and to respect the dignity of every human being.

Some of these things are relatively easy to do. We can all continue in the community of faith, the apostles' teaching, the breaking of bread and the prayers merely by attending church, listening to the readings from the Scriptures and the sermons, and joining in the celebration of the Eucharist. That's not *too* hard. On the other hand, seeking Christ in all people and loving our neighbours as ourselves can be very, very difficult. And striving for justice and peace is the sort of thing that gets Christians accused of being "do-gooders". Fortunately, we don't have to try to do any of these things by ourself. The answer Ash will give when I ask him these questions is: "With God's help, I will." In baptism we are united with Christ, everything that is his becomes ours, and that includes God's strength and support as we seek to live godly lives. We are never left alone; God's love is always with us. That's the only way *any* of us can live as Christians, and that's the only way Ash will be able to fulfil the promises he makes today – *with God's help*.

So, today we rejoice. Not just because Ash joins us as our brother in Christ, a full member of the church. But because in his baptism we are reminded of our own, reminded that we are God's beloved children and that God accompanies us and encourages us as we seek to live as disciples of Christ. With God's help, we can do anything. Thanks be to God. Amen.

⁵ The Canons of Hippolytus, in Maxwell E. Johnson (ed.), *Documents of the Baptismal Liturgy*, 3rd Edition (London: SPCK, 2003), pp. 129-30.

⁶ The Pilgrimage of Egeria, in Maxwell E. Johnson (ed.), *Documents of the Baptismal Liturgy*, 3rd Edition (London: SPCK, 2003), pp. 33-4.