

St. Bride's Church of Scotland, Newtonmore

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BEGINNINGS

11th June 2017

Matthew 28:16-20

Psalm 78:1-8

Think of all the new things that Joseph has before him! New sights, smells, good and bad, new sounds to learn to understand, new things to feel, with his nerve endings and in his emotions, new tastes, nearly every taste is still unknown to him! He will have new abilities to master, walking, speaking, then running, jumping, hopping, skipping, dancing. Maybe one day he will be a gymnast, who knows. Or maybe he will be content to take a good walk. He could be a chef, or a neuroscientist, he could work in a shop or be a stay at home Dad – he could do all of these things in the course of his life! At six months, he has already learned a lot, but still he is a bundle of unknown possibilities. What we hope for most of all, is that he should live and thrive and be happy and give happiness all his days. Bringing him to God in baptism is not a guarantee of this, though. But baptism is the first step in a life of faith, so that if Joseph continues in the path he has been placed on today, whatever his circumstances, his life will have meaning and purpose.

Babies - we love them. We love them for all kinds of reasons, even if they do not belong to our families. One of the reasons we love babies is because we see that there are so many firsts coming their way, so many new beginnings and new discoveries ahead of them. *Everything* is new to a baby, for them the world is new created. This is Joseph's first Summer. He has never seen Summer flowers before, or lambs or felt the warmth of the sun after winter. And yes, we think that he won't remember, not in detail, but still his experiences in this his first year are going to help build up his understanding of the world. Everything is new for babies, and in watching them we can sometimes rediscover our wonder at the newness of the world.

One of the delights of parenting for Christians is teaching their children about the love of God. It is telling the stories of Jesus, the parables he told, the stories of his birth and his life and his death and resurrection, and maybe hearing them again themselves as if for the first time. We try to teach our children wrong from right, and try to remember to teach it twice as much by example as by precept. And we have the joy of teaching them to use the great gift of prayer, and letting them know that to do so is a normal thing for us.

Asaph the psalmist said: *"I will open my mouth with a parable; I will teach you things from the past - things we have heard and known, things our ancestors told us. We will not hide them from their descendants; we will tell the next generation the praiseworthy deeds of the Lord; his power and the wonders he has done."*

Of all the knowledge, of all the truths about the world, of all there is in life to delight in, surely *"The praiseworthy deeds of the Lord; his power and the wonders he has done."* is the best thing there is to pass on, and the best way to learn this is gradually, a little at a time, as a child grows. We have all heard people with wonderful sto-

ries of sudden revelations of God and conversion to the faith, of dramatically leaving behind a life of wickedness or great selfishness, and having their lives transformed by the sudden knowledge of the love of Christ. These can be good stories to listen to; but great as these stories are, and inspiring and heart-warming, everyone I have ever met who has such a story to tell wishes that their story was different. Everyone who has made sudden and dramatic conversion wishes that they had had the chance to grow up in the knowledge and faith of Christ, so that no part of their lives would have been outside their knowledge of his love for them.

The stories we have to pass on about Jesus, and about the praiseworthy deeds of the Lord are family stories. They belong to us as children of God, just as much as the stories you may tell around the family table about dear old Aunt Eliza, or that funny time when Grandad tried to go down the chute in the park and got stuck; just as much as these are family stories, so are the stories about Jesus and the praiseworthy deeds of the Lord. Today, with his baptism, Joseph is having one of his beginning points: he is beginning in God's family. He has no idea of what to expect, just as he did not expect to have her head made wet by me. It is a beginning.

Beginnings are good, but you don't want to stop there. A thing can only be a beginning if you know that there is more to come. If you cast on a row of knitting, you have made a start, a beginning, but if you do no more than that, if you never knit up the stitches into a garment, then you might as well not bother. If you put on your hiking boots you have taken the first step to climbing a Munro, but if you never step outside, or never leave your garden, you might as well have put something lighter on your feet. Beginnings are not an end in themselves.

When Jesus gave the command go to all nations and baptise in God's threefold name, that was only part of what he told us to do. There was the going and the baptising, but that was just the beginning, and it is still just the beginning. He also said that we should make disciples, teaching them to obey all that he has commanded. That means moving on from the beginnings that we learn as children to develop a more adult faith. I sometimes wonder if we do right in the way we tell our children the stories of Jesus and the praiseworthy deeds of the Lord. We want them to understand, but if we make things too simple then they conclude that they have understood, and very often they think that they have understood all that there is to know about God. We need to find ways to tell them but still let them understand that there is more that they have yet to grasp, and that in fact no one knows it all when it comes to God, so that the adventure of discovery can be life-long.

Making and being disciples and teaching and learning to obey all that Jesus commanded means leaving the beginnings behind. That doesn't mean we forget or belittle the first steps in faith that we have taken, but we can't keep repeating our first steps if we are to grow. We have to dare to step further into the mysteries of faith, to discover more about Jesus and the praiseworthy deeds of the Lord. Joseph cannot really be a disciple yet, but he can learn to be one. He can't choose to live in Jesus' way until he knows what that way is.

The downside of baptising very young children is that they don't remember the event. Very few of you here, unless like me, you were baptised a little later in life, will remember your baptism, the beginning of your coming into the family of God. But today, when you have watched Joseph receiving God's grace in the sacrament, you can remember and reflect that this was done for you as well. It was done *for* you, because a sacrament is God's gift to us. It is something God does, keeping his side

of a promise. If you were baptised then there was a day when you began your life in God's family, a day when God's love was shown you through the water, and you were welcomed into the beginning of your new life.

That day, whenever it was, was a beginning in your faith. How have you gone on since then? Have you worked at your discipleship? Have you moved from the children's versions of Bible stories to reading the word of God for yourself? Have you learned to make prayer the normal thing to do in the course of your days? Probably none of us can answer these questions with complete satisfaction. We are all aware that there is more we could have done, chances wasted, opportunities squandered, habits not formed.

But the great thing with God is that there is no end to the new beginnings he offers us. If we have not made as good a progress as we could wish, or as we know God might wish, in what we started, God is still God. He is still the loving Father of the family. He will not throw out his children in disgust or disappointment. If we have stuck near the beginning of what should have been a life-long journey of faith, he will not make impossible demands. Instead he remembers that we are his children, that we were and so always are his babies. And again and again he will hold our hands as we take tentative steps, as we try to walk so far one day, then next day a little further, as we seek to understand a little and then a little more, as we learn to talk to him, one word, then two, then sentences, then stories, then even discussions. The life of faith is as full of new beginnings, of firsts, of growth and development as the life of the smallest baby, and just as full of wonder as well. Amen.

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