

**3 November 2019**

**2 Thessalonians 1.1-4, 11-12**

**Luke 19.1-10**

**Living it out!**

Over the next few weeks we are going to hear a lot of words from politicians – claims and counter-claims, policies and promises.

The question, of course, is will they deliver on those words? Will their actions match their rhetoric?

Having spoken out, will they then live it out?

Now that's a good question to turn upon ourselves as Christians.

Having declared our faith, will we live it out?

Because being a Christian is not simply about the statement we make, it's about the lives that we live. Christian faith is not simply a series of propositions that we say 'Yes' to. The words that we say, the faith that we proclaim, needs to be lived out.

That's why baptism has always been such a powerful symbol of the beginning of the Christian life.

It reminds us that words are not enough.

Of course, it is important that someone who is beginning their life with Christ, openly confesses their faith and trust in God, their commitment to Jesus as Saviour and Lord – but the act of baptism reminds us that words on their own are not enough.

We are not just committing our mouths and our minds to this venture of following Jesus. This is something that every part of our lives has got to get involved in – and so the words are acted out, to demonstrate that these words and statements will always need to be lived out.

It's not quite as dramatic with the baptism of a child, but the symbolism is still there, as the pouring of water over the head symbolises the immersing of the child, body, mind and spirit into the grace of God.

## ***Baptism is a statement of total commitment***

It is saying – ‘I am in it one hundred percent, from the tips of my toes to the last hair on my head.’

And not just ‘I am in it,’ but ‘I am in it with Jesus’ ...

We are baptised because we want to follow the way of Jesus. Every last bit of me is involved in wanting to live with Jesus and for Jesus.

And we make that statement because baptism, before it ever symbolises our faith, symbolises God’s grace – God’s generous love – shown to us in Jesus.

Jesus’s own baptism was a statement of his solidarity with us and for us, from the tips of his toes to the last hair on his head. It was his way of saying, ‘I am in this with you and for you.’ And he lived out this generous grace to the end ... as he accepted the baptism of death ... in order to lead us through death to new life.

The faith that we proclaim is a faith that is to be lived out. And we are invited to put every last bit of us into that enterprise.

I love watching the Great British Bake Off – one of my television highlights of the year.

The final was this week and David ... who had never been star baker, came from behind to win the final quite convincingly.

If you watch the Bake Off you will know that the judges have three common criticisms that they use:

- The ‘soggy bottom’ – the pie that has not been baked enough on the bottom.
- If there is fruit in a mixture, is it evenly distributed, or has it all sunk to the bottom?
- ‘All style and no substance’ – a cake that looks amazing to the eye, but has no flavour, or hasn’t been baked at all well.

The question for us with our faith is

- Is our faith half-baked? – we have allowed part of our lives to be fully cooked, but there are other parts that are decidedly soggy.

- Is our faith evenly distributed throughout our lives? Or are there some parts that we allow to become a faith-free zone?
- Are we 'all style and no substance'? We put on a good outward show of faith ... but when you taste the cookie, there's just no flavour. Our words are great ... but it just doesn't go any deeper.

Paul affirmed the Thessalonian Christians for the way in which their faith was faith in action.

"Your faith is growing more and more, and the love every one of you has for each other is increasing."

They weren't just talking faith, they were living their faith, and living it out in lives of love – practical love and care for one another.

### **Baptism is a statement of dependence**

In Baptism by immersion we act out what faith is all about.

The falling back in the water dramatizes our giving ourselves over fully to God.

Inevitably you have to trust the minister in this ... and I am glad to say that in 38 years of ministry I haven't dropped anybody ... yet.

It's one thing to talk about faith and trust ... it is quite another thing actually to put it into action.

We all know that parachutes work ... but how many of us are prepared to jump out of a plane to demonstrate that trust?

We are baptised because we are willing to say that we believe and trust in God's love and depend on his mercy ... but the act of baptism itself enacts the fact that this needs to be lived out in day by day acts of throwing ourselves on God and his mercy.

It is often said that beginning the journey of faith is a little bit like learning to ride a bike.

If you learn as a child, you start riding a tricycle. You then graduate to a two-wheeler with stabilisers.

There then comes a point when the stabilisers come off and your mum or dad run behind you holding the saddle ... and eventually let go ... and you discover that marvellous freedom of riding a bike.

This thing that you shouldn't be able to balance on ... well you actually can. You don't need to put your feet down.

Beginning the journey of faith is discovering that we don't have to hold onto all of the false securities of life, but we can let go and trust God's love ... even amid all of the trials and problems of life – he can be trusted.

Paul comments about the Thessalonians how even in the face of persecution and opposition, they are persevering and their faith is growing.

They are living out their faith, by continuing day in and day out to throw themselves upon God's love and generosity.

Now many people when they learn to ride a bike go through a number of phases. When we are young we probably test out how far we can go ... and so we get more and more reckless, riding faster, taking our hands off the handlebars.

And that's not just when we are very young – a few months ago I saw a man, I guess in his mid-thirties, riding a bike down the High Road, both hands off his handlebars, holding a mobile phone, merrily sending a text while he was riding.

But then eventually, I guess we all begin to get a bit wiser and ride our bikes somewhat more cautiously ... at least on the roads.

And I suspect that for many of us, our journey of faith has taken that kind of trajectory. When first following Jesus we might have got a little reckless in our faith, but over the years we have become somewhat wiser.

But what we have to be really careful of in the life of faith, is that we don't find ourselves putting the stabilisers back on. No longer finding our hope, our identity, our purpose and our security by throwing ourselves on God's love, but turning back to the false security of self-reliance, status, virtue, money, position.

We need to keep on living out this radical dependence on God that we enact in baptism.

**Baptism is about new beginnings**

Baptism is full of the symbolism of new beginnings.

The water symbolises washing off all of the dirt and mess of the past, and accepting God's forgiveness.

Paul talks about baptism as 'dying and rising with Christ'. We die to our old way of life, we are raised to live in the power of the risen Christ.

In the early church, certainly from the second century onwards, in some places candidates for baptism would take off their clothes before they were baptised and then would symbolically put on new clothes (often white robes) as they emerged from being baptised. They symbolised taking off one way of life and putting on a new way of life.

That's not a practice that I intend to resurrect!

And again, new beginning need to be lived out in practice. We don't just talk about it, we live it.

That's something that Zacchaeus seemed to instinctively know when he encountered Jesus.

He was so overwhelmed by Jesus inviting himself around to his house for tea, that he realised that he needed to make a fresh start in his life. And that meant putting right what he had done wrong, and starting as he meant to continue.

- Recompensing those he had cheated;
- re-setting the compass of his life so that he no longer lived for self, but lived for others,
- living with compassion for the poor and a commitment to justice.

Jesus described what had happened that day as 'salvation'.

Salvation wasn't just something that happened in Zacchaeus' heart – it wasn't just change of heart and mind – it was a new way of life that he threw himself into. A change of heart that was then lived out in concrete actions.

But when we say that baptism is all about living out new beginnings, let's get it right...

In the same way that baptism demonstrates a total commitment that needs to be lived out day in and day out;

In the same way that baptism enacts a dependence on God that that we then re-enact throughout our lives;

So baptism symbolises a way of life that is not about one new beginning that happened the day we were baptised or began our Christian journey, but which models what living the Christian life is always about, day in and day out.

The very character of the Christian life is that we are about new beginnings, constantly being renewed by God.

There is that wonderful verse from Lamentations 3.22-3

“Because of the Lord’s great love we are not consumed,  
for his compassions never fail.

They are new every morning,  
great is your faithfulness.”

God’s mercies are new every morning, and God calls us each new day to experience the newness of his love and to live out this wonderful gospel of new beginnings.

We often use the image of the caterpillar transforming into a butterfly to illustrate the kind of renewal and transformation that takes place in our lives when we entrust ourselves to Jesus.

This is a wonderful picture, but the problem with it is that it only happens once in the life-cycle of the butterfly.

We need to put alongside that another image for the Christian life, because the Christian life is not about one single ‘new beginning’. It is about entering a life that is all about new beginnings all of the time.

Perhaps we need to put alongside this picture, the picture of the snake that sheds its skin again and again as it grows. It’s a far less glamorous metaphor than that of the butterfly, but it gets the point across.

We enter a way of life that is all about the possibility of new beginnings each new day.

So let’s live it out, this faith that we profess in baptism.

