

**Holy Trinity Brussels**  
**Sermon at Morning Eucharist with Baptism**  
**Lent 4 14 March 2010**

Readings: Joshua 5:9-12  
2 Corinthians 5:16-21  
Luke 15: 1-2, 11-32

**Celebrating a new creation**

Lord, give us weak eyes  
for things of little worth,  
and eyes clear sighted  
in all of your truth.

**Who is the story about?**

Today's gospel story is justly famous. It is simple and simply told, yet it is richly suggestive.

Let me ask you: this is a story about a father and his two sons. But who is it about?

We call it the story of the prodigal son, so is it mainly about the younger son? Or is it about the father, who rejoices when his son returns home? Is it about the resentful older son, left out, not even told that a party is starting at home? Who is the story about?

Let me change the question a little. Three types of people are present in the introduction: the tax collectors and sinners, who want to hear what Jesus is saying; the Pharisees and the scribes, who grumble; and "This fellow who welcomes sinners and eats with them", Jesus himself. Who is in the spotlight? Who is the story about?

When, in a few years time, Lucio or Jocelyn picks up a book to read a bedtime story to Christian, if it starts off "once upon a time, there was a little boy..." Christian will sit up, because he will feel that the little boy stands for him, and will feel involved. Now, given that Jesus' story makes us sit up and listen: who do you identify with in the story?

Who is the story about, what is the story told for, who do you identify with? To understand the story, we need think how to answer these questions.

## **Christian's baptism**

This is a very important day. Christian has received the sacrament of Baptism. He is marked as a member of the church of Christ. Today this little boy has received his Christian name: the name by which he is known in the Christian church; the name by which God calls him: Christian.

A few weeks ago I was travelling on the Eurostar. As I was ploughing through the crowded waiting area, I vaguely heard: "David". I turned round, and there was someone I knew.

Having a name is very important. It is the key to relationship. Today, we have marked the way that God has entered into relationship with this lovely little boy. In the years to come, in the melee of life, God will call him: *Christian!* How he responds will determine what sort of person he becomes.

Happily, the Christian churches agree about baptism.<sup>1</sup>

Baptism goes with conversion, with turning towards God, like I did at the call of my name. It goes with faith. Baptism is about entering into dialogue with God. God calls Christian and he responds. Christian will need God and God has promised that he will be available. Christian is now in the company of the church. Baptism is, for him, the beginning of a journey of faith. Baptism is not an event that concerns Christian and God alone: it concerns Lucio and Jocelyn, and you and me too. In this baptism, God has said *Yes* to Christian: but that *yes* is something that he comes to know primarily through his parents, and through other Christian believers.

Now you and I know, because there are all too many examples to remind us, that baptism does not guarantee that the rest of Christian's life will be plain sailing.

So let's ask, as Christian sets out on his new journey of faith if there is today, already, something in the Bible readings that can help him on his way?

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<sup>1</sup> *Handbook of Catholic Theology* ed Beinert and Schuessler Fiorenza p42

## Key words

Let me highlight 3 key words that will be very important for Christian in the years to come. Maybe by coincidence, they all begin with the same letter.

**Reconciliation** is the key word in the passage from 2 Corinthians. When we become Christians, we are reconciled with God.

Maybe it is hard to understand what this could mean for Christian, a little baby. But Paul makes it clear that reconciliation is a part of our relationship with God that continues throughout our lives. Like the father in Jesus' story, God initiates the reconciliation for us and for Christian; and we need to go on being reconciled throughout our lives and to bring that reconciliation to others.

The second is that we must be **prepared to receive**. The younger son has a plan, a speech all ready. He hopes to become a servant.

But the father is not listening. His generosity far exceeds the expectations of the younger son. Happily, the younger son is *prepared to receive*.

Sometimes, in life, we are curiously unwilling to receive from others. No, no that is too generous. No, I insist, I cannot take this. Sometimes it is because we are scared of imposing on someone's generosity. Sometimes it is because we are scared of incurring an obligation, or of finding ourselves committed to a relationship.

We must be *prepared to receive* God's gracious gifts, and to go on receiving from God all through life. Baptism opens a dialogue of faith through which we become open to receive the good things of God, not just today but every day.

The elder son is reluctant in this respect. He has a well worked-out scheme where he works hard in the fields and his share in the good things of his father's house are his by right. He has no room for grace. He is looking for his rights, not for reconciliation. He is not *prepared to receive*.

The most obvious keyword of our readings, one that we do indeed attach to baptism, is: **Rejoice!** It is right for Lucio and Jocelyn to celebrate Christian's baptism. Rejoicing is the common thread in the three stories of Luke 15. The father rejoices, the younger son rejoices. And the father pleads with the elder son to rejoice.

The Christian life has many challenges, but fundamentally it calls us to join in the joy of God.

## **After the party comes freedom**

*Reconciliation, receiving and rejoicing* are aspects of the life in which Christian, and all Christians, are engaged.

What comes after the party?

Joshua tells us how, after God's people arrived in the promised land, they celebrated the Passover and renewed their commitment. It felt as if the past had been rolled up behind them. The future is open before them, full of the good things of the promised land. They do not need manna any more.

But the future is not going to be easy. The next stop is Jericho.

For the father and two sons of Jesus' story, after the party comes - tomorrow.

The younger son hoped to wake up as a servant. Instead, he will wake up free.

The Israelites, the father and his sons, you and I and Christian are set free.

The life of freedom is not fed by manna: it has to be lived from the produce of the land. It is a journey of faith, a dialogue with God in which we try to work out the meaning of the story that we are living.

Christian, like the rest of us, will find that God is there, calling him by name, available to him.

## **Conclusion - Relationship**

*Reconciliation, receiving and rejoicing* go along with yet another word that starts with an *re*.

Jesus makes a beautiful point at the end of his story. The older brother is angry<sup>2</sup>: "This *son of yours..* has devoured your property..." Have any of us ever said to our spouse, "Do you see what that child of yours is doing?"

But in the father replies:<sup>3</sup> "This *brother of yours..* was dead and has come to life."

He is not just my son, he is your brother.

At the core of Jesus' story and of Christian baptism is ***relationship***.

Maybe that helps answer the question we started with: What is Jesus' story about?

***David White***

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<sup>2</sup> Verse 30

<sup>3</sup> Verse 32