

It is always exciting to have a baptism service here at Christ Church and it will be great to see Rebekah and Elaine baptised this morning. I hope you have enjoyed hearing their stories this morning. But more if you are here today and have not yet found faith in Jesus I hope their stories will encourage you to explore faith for yourself. God has been at work in the lives of these friends drawing them to himself and helping them see that, through the death of Jesus they can be forgiven and restored as children of God. He wants each of us here this morning to understand that for ourselves.

However the fact that we are doing these baptisms in the context of a church service reminds us that one aspect of baptism is that of belonging. Through baptism we, as it were, officially join the church. It is a sign of membership.

But what does that mean? What goes on in church?

I remember when I was a teenager I was in the scouts and we had to go to church parade. It was always communion and I would sit in my seat towards the back of the church while people went up for communion wondering what on earth was going on up there at the front?

In that passage we had read from Acts 2:42-47 we see a little about what the church was doing right at the start of its existence.

Jesus had died and risen. He had met with his disciples after his resurrection and told them to wait for the coming of the Holy Spirit. Then Jesus had ascended. They had waited and then as we saw last week the Holy Spirit came and what happened? "Those who accepted the message were baptised and about three thousand were added to their number that day." (Acts 2:41)

They believed and were baptised just as these friends and then what?

Well in the next verses we see a little of how those Christians as a group went about working out their faith. There is much in there and I want simply to pick up three things to leave with these friends who have been baptised and with all of us this morning.

1. They were eager to learn

It says "they devoted themselves to the apostles teaching." (Acts 2:42)

Basically they had come to faith and now they were eager to learn more about that faith and they learnt it from those who had been with Jesus, who had heard him teach and seen him put to death. These people were new born in their faith just a few days old as Christians and if they were to grow and flourish they needed feeding.

Peter in one of his letters encouraged new Christians with these words "like new born babies crave pure spiritual milk so that by it you may grow up in your salvation." (1 Pet 2:2)

Just as babies crave to be fed so these new Christians in Jerusalem eagerly desired to learn from the apostles.

I was with my daughter Anna last weekend. She has four children and another on the way!

It was very interesting watching feeding time, I use the term purposely! Caleb, the eldest is six will feed himself and will eat just about anything going and as much as he can get away with. Beth, who was five last Saturday, will also feed herself. Breakfast is her favourite meal but she is not always so keen on the other meals. Toby who is number three will eat well but usually needs his food cut up for him so that he can manage it. Joel number four still needs help in feeding. Anna's concern in all this was to ensure that they were fed and fed with proper and suitable things so that they grow fit and healthy.

Here it seems for us is a lesson from these early Christians and from ordinary life. If we would grow we need to feed properly and yet we don't, like Anna's children, always find that easy.

When it comes to learning about our faith from the Bible to start with we might need almost spoon feeding. Later we may be able to learn for ourselves but at times we may find it hard to understand and need it as it were someone to cut it up for us to make it easier to digest. There will be times when we find certain parts of the Bible more to our liking a bit like Beth and her breakfast. Hopefully we will all get to the point where like Caleb we have a great appetite for food and the word of God. But you who will be baptised soon and all of us if we would continue in the faith and grow in our Christian lives we must "devote ourselves to the apostles teaching" that is we must read the Bible. It is our spiritual food.

2. The enjoyed being together

"they devoted themselves....to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread" (Acts 2:42)

They had shared a common experience of hearing the gospel, repentance and baptism. Now they were sharing a common devotion to each other which Luke, the writer of Acts, calls fellowship.

I have just been talking about my family and especially my grandchildren and they are four very different children. We have been listening to Rebekah and Elaine two very different children of God and yet they and all of us here who have found faith in Jesus have much in common. They have a shared experience of faith and in a while they will have a shared experience of baptism and from their shared experience comes a bond.

Through faith and baptism they join the church which is elsewhere in the Bible described as the family of God.

These Christians devoted themselves to Jesus because of all he had done for them through his death but they also devoted themselves to each other. Devoted is a strong word isn't it and the word we have translated devoted here has the idea of "stuck like glue".

They were learning together as we have seen, worshipping together, sharing together practically. In a sense for Rebekah and Elaine I think from what I know of you and have seen of you, you already understand the importance of meeting up regularly with other Christians. But I want to make the point for all of us from the early church that being with the people of God was seen as vitally important.

Fellowship is key to the growth of the church. We should not deny others the joy of our fellowship by arbitrarily missing those key times of fellowship of which Sunday is one.

Friends are we sufficiently devoted to the fellowship to do everything possible to be with the fellowship when we meet and to give all we can to sustain and help the people of God to grow?

3. they made a prayer a priority

Frequently when I meet new people, almost I think as a defence mechanism, they say to me "I'm not religious". Sometimes I reply with the words "me neither", which causes some confusion. Religion is about rules and ritual and neither of those is my cup of tea. Being a Christian as our friends in different ways have shared this morning is about a relationship. A relationship with God our Father which affects, as we have just been seeing, our relationship with other Christians our brother and sisters in the faith.

Prayer is the means by which we communicate with our heavenly Father. In Acts we see frequently the church at prayer together. Prayer is vital if we are to grow in our salvation and grow in our relationship with God.

Going back to meal time at Anna's. With her husband Chris not there even though there was a surfeit of grandparents, everything was directed at Mum. "Mum can I have this? Mum I don't want that. Mum where is this? Mum Toby's kicking me" and so on. A myriad of things through which needs are being met and relationship is growing.

I'm sorry but I struggle to talk about prayer without referring to the Perishers cartoon strip which used to be in the Daily Mirror. In one cartoon Masie and her little brother Baby Grumplin are walking into church. Baby Grumplin says "There's going to be a big push on the prayer front this weekend Masie." He goes on "I want a new cowboy hat and a revolver and a jumbo painting book and..." Only to be interrupted by his sister who says "I've told you before Baby Grumplin you mustn't pray for selfish things. You should pray for other people." She then adds the suggestion "Why don't you pray for poor ole Mr Scroggins up the road?" Baby Grumplin says "Oh all right then" and then adds, "but he'll have a shock when he receives a cowboy hat and a revolver and a jumbo painting book and..."

Of course prayer is more than just asking and it is not about just asking for ourselves.

But as we talk to God in prayer and yes as we ask in prayer for others and for ourselves so as we see God's answers we grow in trust, faith, gratitude and so on.

It is a huge part of our on going growth as Christians. So I would encourage Rebekah and Elaine and all of us to be praying people and, as we saw a couple of weeks ago, to do it together with other Christians.

The journey of individual Christians and of the church is a long one. Rebekah and Elaine are in effect at the beginning of their Christian life. As we read here in Acts the same was true of many Christians and of the church.

The aim is to grow as we continue in our faith and here we see three aids to that growth, the apostles teaching, fellowship with other Christians and prayer. These new Christians in Acts stuck to these things like glue and they and the church grew.

Rebekah and Elaine my prayer is that you will follow their example but then all of us here should make that our goal as well.