

Homily, St. Andrew's (baptism)
All Saints, Oct 30, 2016
Luke 6: 20-31

Let us pray: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts be ever more acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our Rock and our Redeemer.

Today we celebrate All Saints day. The holy day is actually November 1, but we've moved it forward a few days, partly because it's a good day for us to welcome a new little saint, Elise, into the household of God through baptism. On All Saints Day last year we also focussed on the saints among us, though in a very different way. Last year we heard from Fabian Hugh at 8:00am and Doreen Catley at 10:30am. It turned out to be the last time Doreen was physically among us at a regular Sunday worship service as her health took a bad turn shortly thereafter and she died just a few months later. This week another of the saints among us, Mathew Zachariah, also passed into eternity and with that loss still fresh in our hearts and minds, there is a bittersweet-ness to our celebration today. There is also a profound symbolism in having said goodbye to Mathew on Friday, the day of Jesus' crucifixion, and now baptizing little Elise on this Sunday morning, the day of Resurrection. And we do this in the context of this season of remembrance of the saints of the Lord.

This year's assigned Gospel for All Saints is the beginning of Jesus' Sermon on the Plain from Luke's Gospel. Mirroring the Gospel of Matthew's more famous "Sermon on the Mount", it too begins with Jesus proclaiming blessedness in a series of beatitudes. Luke's beatitudes are, however, different from those found in Matthew's Gospel and that are much more commonly known and quoted. The difference stands out particularly when we compare the first verses... Matthew begins: "Blessed are the poor in spirit..." where Luke starts with: "Blessed are you who are poor..." Here and throughout Luke's Gospel, there is a focus on earthly injustice and what liberation theologian Gustavo Gutierrez called God's "preferential love for the poor."

On Friday we reflected on how important this part of Jesus' teaching was to our dear friend Mathew. A core part of the witness and example of his life and faith was his commitment to justice and peace, and his work in advocating for those suffering because of society's unjust structures like racism, economic systems that make the rich richer and the poor poorer, corruption, and anything that smacks of discrimination. As we remember Mathew's deep commitment to these things, all that he taught us, it seems important to consider today what specifically it is about God and Jesus, the Christian Gospel, and the life of faith that we want to teach, to pass on, to little Elise as she grows among us. What messages do we want her to absorb through our worship and prayer? What is most important about Christian faith, and our Anglican way of living it out, that we most want her to experience and learn from us?

Traditionally in many churches, there were panels on either side of the sanctuary carved or painted with core church teachings... often the Lord's Prayer and the 10 Commandments. In some churches children would have to memorize certain biblical verses or creeds, perhaps as part of a confirmation program. In terms of your core understanding and practice of Christian faith, what do you think matters most... One of the ancient creeds? The Lord's Prayer? The 10 Commandments? The Marks of Mission? something else...?

I'm not sure where, but somewhere I heard the suggestion that it is the Beatitudes we should carve into our buildings as a core teaching for our children to memorize, particularly instead of the 10 Commandments. Such a suggestion points to a shift in what might be considered most important. Rather than a list of rules to follow, some think it is a recitation of God's blessing to those who are suffering in poverty and hunger, those who are grieving, those who are persecuted for doing right, that should be most central in the faith we proclaim and teach to our children. Note that in Luke's version of the beatitudes, the blessings are followed by corresponding "woes" to those on the other side of the coin... those who are rich and full and laughing and well-spoken of. It is a difficult and uncomfortable teaching and yet we know saints, saints like our Mathew, who strove to live out these very values as a constituent part of their practice of faith.

This is all to say that what mattered the most in the church's teaching in days gone by might not be what we consider most important to teach and to live today. It's not a judgement that how we understood and lived our faith in the past was somehow wrong or bad... it is rather just an acknowledgement that things change. What or how we learned about Christian belief and practice in our childhoods might not be what we want to pass on to the young ones among us today. The world Elise is growing up in is very different than the world many of us grew up in and it is the responsibility of each generation to work out how best to be faithful in their own time and place. We need to reflect from time to time on our Christian pilgrimage so that it remains vital and life-giving throughout our lives and into the next generations.

In this generation, there continues to be lots of good work to help us along our way. At the conference I recently attended, for instance, I heard Brian McLaren speak about his new book, *The Great Spiritual Migration*. The book details a 3-fold migration - three types of movement - mirrored in the journey from Good Friday, through Holy Saturday and on to Easter Sunday. "Those three days," McLaren writes, "represent three essential movements that we must experience, as individuals and as communities, so that our faith can be born anew." (13) He goes on to describe a painful death, a letting go, on Good Friday of a Christianity lived primarily as a belief-system and a spiritual migration to Christianity as a way of life - the way of love.

Holy Saturday represents "a silence, a contemplative pause in the aftermath of Friday's loss..." when letting go gives way to letting be as we make a theological migration in our basic understanding of God as a violent God of domination to a nonviolent God of liberation. We might hear echoes of this theological migration in the second part of our Gospel reading today as Luke turns from beatitudes and woes, to instructions about loving our enemies. As one commentator noted, according to Luke, "there is no place in the Christian ethic for vengeance or retaliation." (NIB, 146) Given this kind of teaching, why would we imagine God as a harsh taskmaster who demands blood in payment for our mistakes and missteps?

Finally comes Sunday - the day of resurrection - when having let go and let be, we can travel lighter with a missional migration from being an organized religion to being a religion organizing for the common good. It is this third migration, the work of resurrection and new life, that we have considered through the lens of the Marks of Mission. At the end of these 3 migrations, the focus is not on ourselves or the survival of our church, but rather on the work of God in the world by lifting up the poor, feeding the hungry, comforting the sorrowful, and encouraging the faithful, as we hear in Luke's beatitudes today.

In just a few minutes, we will commit to our responsibility to love and support Elise in her Christian journey, with all the challenge and joy that entails. Together we are living out the second Mark of Mission to “teach, baptize and nurture new believers...” but we do so only in response to the ministry, the gift of her presence, that she already offers to us. This is what I have been most acutely aware of through this difficult week. Today little Elise, not quite 4 months in to her life on earth, lives out her ministry among us simply by being herself... her innocence and beauty as a child a God reminds us of the promise of life God offers us in this community of St. Andrew’s. Elise offers us the gift and ministry of comfort and hope as the embodiment of new life among us. In the shadow of death, it is a ministry we really need today. I don’t know how Elise (or her family) will feel about this, but if you are feeling particularly sad today, I encourage you to draw near to Elise and let her comfort you. “Cuddle the baby!” Kate said in the office this week... let her coos and cries, her smiles and gurgles, encourage you in your life of faith, your commitment to Christ.

We give thanks today for this little saint among us... she can’t yet teach us about unjust structures of society the way Mathew did, or show us a life of quiet service the way Ron did, or speak about her attitude of gratitude as Doreen did... but she can bring us the joy and hope of Christ just because she is. The power of baptism is that we become saints before we have *done* much of anything at all. We are saints because God chooses first to love us and to give us life.

As we pray today that Elise live into her calling as a beloved child of God, may we be reminded that it is our calling too as we share the gift of our life together in Christ.