

5th Sunday Year A
Baptism of Beatrice Cicic-Brazil

Saul of Tarsus was a highly educated man. He was a Pharisee, a pupil of the famous teacher Gamaliel, a sophisticated rhetorician and theologian whose complex thinking still challenges us today. But he is not known to us as Saul the Pharisee, he is known to us as Paul the apostle. His identity was given to him anew when he encountered God in Jesus Christ. The reading we heard from Paul's writings reminds us that when - as Paul, not Saul - he went to Corinth, a melting pot of Hellenistic life and culture, he set his store not by lofty words or philosophical argument, but by the execution of a common criminal - the cross of Jesus Christ. He recognised what was essential about all Christian action: that it starts from the right place, from Christ crucified, else it is not properly Christian. The authority on which everything relied was not something showy or intellectually impressive, not something which the world called wise, but something which was both simple and terrible – the death of the God of love at the hands of human fear.

The cross of Christ is the basis of Christian identity. For this reason, the first action we perform as we bring Beatrice to

baptism, is to make the sign of the cross on her forehead with the holy oil set apart for this purpose. She receives the badge of membership, unseen once applied but indelible through the grace of the sacrament, to demonstrate to the world that she is claimed by Christ, and adopted by God as a member of the body of his son. To sign a child with an instrument of death is, at the very least, bizarre. But we also learn from Paul's writings of the intimate and essential connection between the act of baptism, and the dying and rising of Christ. We start with the offering of Christ on the cross, and we move through the ritual of baptism to the new light of Easter in which every Christian, whether four months or 94 years, is enfolded in this sacrament.

Most people think of baptism simply as an act which involves water. The earliest people to be baptised were, of course, adults, and the dramatic act of descending under water in order to be raised up is a very powerful symbol which the Christian church of the West has given up too easily. Three times the water will be poured over Beatrice's head, as she is baptised in the name of Father, Son and Holy Spirit, and as we symbolically drown her - for that is what we're doing - we are also, symbolically, and extraordinarily, placing her three times in the tomb of Christ. In the name of the Father - into the tomb with Christ on the Friday;

and of the Son - into the tomb with Christ on the Saturday; and of the Holy Spirit - into the tomb again on the Sunday and then up, out from the death of human weakness into the life of God's perfect love. When Beatrice has received the waters of baptism she is then anointed again, this time with the oil of chrism, the sign by which the gift of the Holy Spirit is sealed upon and within her as the beloved child of God.

In the Sermon on the Mount, from which we heard in our gospel reading, Jesus calls his followers the salt of the earth. They are charged with the responsibility to make things better, to bring out new opportunities, to preserve that which is good and to expand its possibilities. This is a calling for those who follow Christ, a challenge to be more than just a badge wearer, a challenge not simply to acknowledge the love of Christ crucified but to imitate it, to take it into the world, to offer oneself after the pattern of Christ with faith in the conviction that the cross and the resurrection can never be held apart, and to give oneself in love is to bring life where there is none.

Jesus also calls his followers the light of the world. They are to illuminate those around them with the gift of that love. At the end of mass, Beatrice will be given a candle, a candle which has

been lit from the Easter Candle which stands beside our high altar. That candle, remember, began its life as it was carried - a single light - into the darkness of the bare and empty church at the beginning of the Easter Vigil service. It is the pillar of fire which marks our Lord's Passover from death to life, the Passover into which each of us was baptised and in which we live as Christians. That light of life is now passed on again, to another of Christ's Easter people, who will live and grow and walk in that light.

Baptism is a beginning. It is God's gift of new life, a life which is to be lived. The sound of that life is composed for us in advance in the story of salvation and the gospel of Jesus Christ. The life that we live, the music that we make, is different in every case, as God plays out his unending variations on the theme of Christian love. But the theme remains common to us all. That theme, that light, is the love of Christ crucified, given to all baptised in his name: it is the badge of our identity, the sign of who we are. Today we sing again the song of salvation as we celebrate a new member of God's church, and we pray for her and with her, that the music of her life might be played in Jesus Christ.