

Baptism & Belonging

One way of looking at today's extract from the letter of Paul to the Philippians is that he's talking about ***belonging***. And a lot of what we're doing this morning is about *belonging*. Most of you are here because you *belong* to Liam & Jessica's family or circle of friends; and today you're celebrating that Eloise now *belongs* to that family and is being incorporated into that circle.

In a wider sense, the groups we belong to help identify and root us as people. I clearly belong to the clergy of the Church of England. I also belong to a load of wildlife-related charities, because I'm passionate about nature. I belong to our Benefice Choir, because I enjoy singing. I belong to a small cell group: three of us who trained for ministry together and continue to meet up on-line. I also belong to Helen and my wider family; and as of last week we have a new member, as I've just become a great-uncle for the first time.

More controversially and politically, there are those who want to question *who belongs in this country*. While to say to someone, in any context, that they *do not belong* can be seriously undermining.

Paul starts by talking about his religious family and some of the groups he belongs or belonged to: *a member of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin ... a Pharisee ...* and, formerly, a zealous *persecutor of the church* – because in his mind, when he was known as Saul, followers of Jesus *did not belong* in faithful Judaism.

But it seems there was something lacking in Paul's former belonging: he has since had such a life-changing experience that he now considers it all worthless, *because of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord*. Saul the Pharisee never met Jesus in the flesh, so Paul, like us, depends on what has been passed on to him by others and what has been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit. Ever since his spiritual encounter with the Risen Christ on the Damascus Road, Paul has wanted to know Christ better, even to the extent, he writes to the Philippians, *of sharing in his sufferings by becoming like him in his death* – in order to know more fully *the power of his resurrection*. Paul wants to become ever more like Jesus; and all because, as he goes on to say, *Christ Jesus has made me his own*. Paul now *belongs* to Jesus. And this is a different order of belonging than mere affiliation. If I say Liam and Jessica belong to each other – which I can say, because I conducted their wedding – that's a different order of belonging from my membership of Norfolk Wildlife Trust. It's a mutual possession and orientation. Indeed, in the letter to the Ephesians, marriage is presented as a symbol of the mystical union between Christ and his Church. In that deeper sense, Paul now *belongs to Jesus*.

But this isn't Liam & Jessica's wedding, it's Eloise's Baptism! (or Christening). What does that have to do with belonging? Well, quite a bit. Through her baptism, Eloise is becoming a member of the Church: soon we will be welcoming her *into the fellowship of faith*. The *Profession of Faith* in this service indicates that faith is a matter of both believing and belonging, as we respond, *I believe and trust in him*. There is sometimes discussion in the Church about which might come first: do you have to already believe to be a member of a church; or do people more often come to faith through belonging?

In baptising young children like Eloise, the Church of England is endorsing the latter: she is too young to believe in the same way that an adult might, but that doesn't mean she can't belong: we welcome her on the understanding that her parents and godparents will bring her up to know and love God as we know him in Jesus Christ, as a guide to her discovering her own faith as she gets older. The baptism candle we'll give her is a reminder of that: it can be lit in future years (in her case, possibly on her birthday) as a reminder of the invitation to her to *shine as a light in the world, to the glory of God the Father*.

In past times, baptism was thought of as a necessary qualification for eternal life; but, however valuable his sacraments, I'm sure God can operate beyond them. Nevertheless, I will give Eloise a certificate, as though it were a qualification and in case she needs to prove it. And I could say she gets a badge of belonging, as I sign her (in oil, so somewhat invisibly) with the sign of the cross. But as I said at the preparation, that's a symbol with an edge, because it was on the cross that Jesus suffered and died. And the accompanying words open up the possibility that identifying as a Christian may entail facing opposition and undergoing sacrifice, even if in our society it may only involve suppression or ridicule, and swimming against the secular tide.

There's more of that darker side to come: at the font, the water of baptism symbolises not only our *rising to new life in Christ*, but also our *death to sin* – i.e. all that acts to separate us from God and neighbour. That ties in with Paul's desire to know both *the power of Christ's resurrection* and to *become like him in his death*: the two go together. That correspondence with Paul is no accident: at the font we identify with Christ; we enter into a new possession and orientation.

So, yes, we rejoice that Eloise now belongs to your family; and that she is going to belong to the Church; but more profoundly and life-changing, very soon Eloise, like the rest of us who are baptized, will belong to Jesus.