

Sermon preached at Roseville Uniting Church by Rev. Laurel Barr at a service of Baptism and Confirmation on Sunday 5th June 2011

You belong to Christ - always !

Bible Text: John 14:15-21

Today is a great day – a day for celebration! It's been my privilege and Michaela's to work with Bethany, Claude, Fionn, Conor and Issy as they have prepared for their baptism and confirmation. Their vital faith and experience of Jesus in their lives has really encouraged me along the way. Today they respond to what God in Jesus Christ has done for them. It's a day of new beginnings because being immersed under the water of Baptism as Bethany will be, speaks of dying with Christ and then rising to a new life. It's a day of belonging in a new way to the church. And today Bethany, Claude, Conor, Fionn and Issy will promise to walk in the light of Christ all of their lives. And **we** will promise to support them.

It may seem strange on such a happy day that I have chosen to speak about a reading from Jesus' farewell speech to his closest friends, the disciples, as they share their last meal together. It is the night before Jesus was killed on the cross. A long shadow of dread and separation hangs over their time together. Jesus' friends are getting more and more anxious and questioning as Jesus speaks. If we read the whole chapter Jesus says he is going away: But his friends ask: Where? Can they come too? What will happen to them when he has gone?

They have relied upon Jesus. He's taught them and mentored them and gotten them out of difficult situations. Jesus has showed them wonderful things - healings and miracles and signs. Jesus has been there for them, counseling them about what to do, speaking up for them when others criticized them. When they have felt exhausted or confused or messed something up it was Jesus who had been beside them giving them the strength and inspiration they needed to get up again. But now Jesus talks about returning to God his heavenly Father and leaving his work for them to carry on. Are they ready for this? How will they remember what Jesus has taught them? They are the rising generation who will lead the young church of Christ but right then they were feeling anxious and inadequate and afraid of being abandoned.

One of the hardest things to do is part from someone we love – especially someone upon whom we have come to rely. I come from a family that moved house a lot and I hated leaving my friends and having to start all over again in a new town at a new school – especially as a teenager.

Earlier this week I took the funeral of one of our oldest members here at Roseville. One of her granddaughters said in the eulogy: "I knew this day would come but Gran had got through tough times before and I had begun to think even though she was 90 that she was indestructible. I will miss our talks and times together so much".

At such times we can feel abandoned and alone. When we move onto a new stage of our lives – starting at high school, leaving school, leaving home, starting work, traveling, getting married and so on it is very exciting – but it is also scary. I have chosen this Bible story because when people are going away or dying they don't talk small talk. They want to talk about what is most important and I believe that as they share that last intimate meal, Jesus is talking to his friends about the things closest to his heart – the things he wants them to remember – and us to remember.

And so Jesus promises his friends that he will not leave them as orphans without support and without protection. He reassures them that whatever happens, he will still be with them even though it will not be in a way that others can see and recognize. Jesus tells his beloved friends that he will ask God the Father to send another to stand beside them – another to be their counselor, their advocate, their comforter, and to be their helper to be the persons he intends for them to become and to do what he calls them to do. This Helper – this Counsellor - Jesus says will be the powerful transforming presence of the Holy Spirit – the Spirit of Truth and love. And so Jesus is saying: “I will not abandon you. I may not be with you physically but I will be with you in my Spirit. You will be filled with the Spirit of God”

In fact the Spirit is even more amazing with his friends than it has been when he was with them. You see the Spirit will be with them in every place at every time in every circumstance forever. And the Spirit will not just walk beside them as Jesus did but would actually live **within** them.

With the Spirit within them, Jesus friends will live in Jesus and Jesus live in them - and as Jesus lives in the Father so will they! They will be in God and God will be in them! Can you see what Jesus is saying? Their lives are woven into the very life of God – who is Father, Son and Holy Spirit; Creator, Redeemer and Sustainer; the communion of love we know as the Trinity.

And this is Christ's promise to you and me too. We will never be alone – not ever. We too have this powerful Spirit presence of God within us. How do you respond to that?

That's an extraordinary privilege! For how can you and I who are mere mortals - and we know how we can let God down and our family and friends down – How can we be part of the God who made the universe and who gives us life? How can we be drawn into the life of the God who loves us so much that he gave us his Son Jesus Christ to be our Saviour? And yet this is the promise made by Jesus to his friends and to us today. Our lives are held – are woven - into the life of God, the God who is love.

And as Jesus talks that night about what is most important for his disciples to do, it is all summed up in his commandments to love. We are all to love God with our whole being and to love one another as Christ has loved us. We walk in the light of Christ in community – members of the church called to love. Jesus also said: We will be known as Christians by our love and the Spirit will help us.

And all this we celebrate today. Today as Bethany is baptized and as Claude and Issy, Conor and Fionn reaffirm their baptism in confirmation, they will be joined to Jesus Christ through the water and the Spirit. In baptism the sign of the cross is traced upon us. Baptism says that we belong to Christ. We are bound to Christ for always and everything that is Jesus Christ's is ours. We are not orphans. As Jesus is the Son so we are children of God our heavenly Father. We have a home which is a relationship with God for ever. God lives in us and we live in God.

Claude and Issy, Conor and Fionn and Bethany we do not know what lies in the future for you. Sometimes you will walk on smooth wide roads and fairly skip along and life will be good. Other times the road will be rough and rocky. Sometimes it will twist and turn and you won't be able to see what is happening next. Sometimes it will be steep and sheer hard work. Sometimes there will be a fork in the road of your life and you will have to decide which way to go. Sometimes voices will call you this way and that and you will wonder which is speaking the truth. Sometimes you may even get lost.

Jesus told a story about a young man who left home saying to his father, “Give me my inheritance. I want to go out and live my own life”. The young man left his parent's home and went overseas. He had a great time but soon all the money was gone. He began living hand to mouth; whatever he could scrounge among the pigs. And then, Jesus said, alone and at his lowest point, the young man came to his senses.

He said "Wait a minute! What am I doing out here living like a pig, starving to death, groveling about? I have parents. I've got a home."

The young man remembered who he was. He remembered his family. And that remembering put him on the path towards home – and Jesus says his father was waiting for him.

Bethany, Conor, Fionn, Claude and Issy we are thrilled to share this service with you today. You are gifted, with your whole lives before you. But wherever your life journey takes you, "do not forget who you are and whose you are"*. You are not alone. There are people here today who love you and support you. But even more important, Christ in His Spirit is with you and in you. You belong in relationship with God who is his Father and your Heavenly Father. You belong to Christ - always!

*William H. Willimon *Remember who you are: Baptism, a Model for Christian Life*, The Upper Room, Nashville, Tennessee, 1980, pp113-4

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