

Sermon

'The eternal flame'

Year A, 2017, Pentecost 12, Holy Eucharist with Holy Baptism



As our children continue to grow at an astounding rate, I often look back fondly on their preschool years and all those times I set out, with a small hand clasping my own, on the morning pilgrimage to Scots Kindergarten. The kinder was located just down the road from our home, behind the local Presbyterian church in West Footscray, and our journey would take us past the large, white cross out the front of the church, and a colourful

mosaic of the burning bush at the entrance, a daily reminder of the presence and glory of God.

Here at Saint Peter's, during Holy Week, the children from our own kindergarten are invited to join us on a 'tour' of the church. It's one of my favourite parts of Holy Week. As we make our way from the kinder towards the front of the church, the excitement is palpable.

Last year, at the front door to the church, we asked the children to take off their shoes, explaining that the Christian church building is a holy place. 'Remove the sandals from your feet, for the place on which you are standing is holy ground.' This year, we invited them to leave their shoes on – to make the point that it is not literally a change of clothes or shoes, but a change of heart, that the Lord requires. Crossing the threshold into the church, one three-year-old declared, 'I've been waiting to come in here all my life!' Out of the mouth of babes.

In our Old Testament reading this morning, we learn how the Most High God revealed himself to Moses on the Mountain of Horeb, the holy mountain of God, through the medium of the burning bush. And in our New Testament reading this morning, we learn that the Most High God has revealed himself to the world in a new and even more profound way: on Calvary, another holy mountain, through the medium of Jesus Christ in His Passion. Christ's passion has lit a holy fire that now burns, without burning out, in the holy Eucharist, and in the heart of the baptized believer.

On any given Sunday morning, as we make our way out of our homes and into this place, we are a bit like Moses ascending Horeb to encounter God. To encounter Jesus Christ. As we enter into the beauty and stillness of worship, we remove the shoes of our souls; we stand barefoot on holy ground, before the fiery flame of Jesus Christ and His passion. Like Moses we have arrived at a holy place, a place of worship and encounter; we shift our focus away from the ephemeral and the temporary and gaze instead on the eternal flame.

‘Come no closer! Remove the sandals from your feet, for the place on which you are standing is holy ground. I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob.’
And Moses hid his face, for he was afraid to look at God.

So overwhelmed is Moses by God’s glory that he covers his face. It’s a gesture of self-effacement, of self denial. As Jesus reminds his followers in our Gospel text, those who would follow him must deny themselves. Indeed, in denying themselves, they will find their true selves: ‘Those who want to save their life will lose it and those who lose their life for my sake will find it.’ Significantly, it is on the holy mountain, barefoot and overwhelmed by the glory of God, that Moses hears God speak his true name.

And at the holy Eucharist, in the presence of the Most High God, we also hear God speak our true name, speak to us out of the eternal flame. And we respond simply, like Moses, ‘Here I am’.

This morning we celebrate the baptism of Baby Pearl. In baptism we enter the salvation of God. We stand barefoot in God’s presence and say, ‘Here I am’. Submitting to the waters of baptism, we discover our our true identity in Christ; we hear our true name spoken. Baptism, in the words of one writer, is ‘there all our lives’. Indeed, Rowan Williams, the former Archbishop of Canterbury, prefers to speak not of our ‘baptism’ but of our ‘baptismal life.’ Baptism is a once-for-all event, but also a journey that takes in our whole life history.

In baptism, the journey of life that ends in death, becomes instead a holy pilgrimage, ending in life. Our baptismal life encompasses our history and our future, everything we are and everything we are meant to be; it is our real life, our true life. This morning we will light a baptismal candle for Pearl, reminding us that in baptism, our life is lit by an eternal flame; every part of it is lived in the glorious, unsettling and humbling presence of God—an idea movingly captured by the American poet Irene Zimmerman,

‘I went to the desert one morning
and walked with Moses in the sand
to where the bush was burning.

That it did not turn to ash
was no surprise to me
for so I'd seen it burning
throughout my childhood days.

But suddenly a voice called out to me
from that bush!

Moses left.

Take off your shoes, I heard,
for the life on which you stand is holy.

I am the ONE WHO IS

And this is how I hold you.

I stood barefoot on the ground
of my life history,
burning through and through
with that mystery.'