

As we come today to baptize young Robert this morning it is entirely appropriate that we ask the question, who is this Jesus that we profess faith in? Why does he matter? Why is it important for Malcolm and Irene and any other parent to bring their child to be baptized?

The Gospel account we have today gives us a very powerful understanding of why it is important for us to place our faith and trust in Jesus and to bring young people for baptism.

Luke has been building us up to this point. He started out earlier in this chapter by telling us about the people who were traveling with Jesus and one of them was Mary Magdalene who had seven demons exorcised from her. Then he told us the parable of the sower. In that parable we are told that the word of God sometimes falls on barren ground and Satan can come and pluck the word of life from people quickly before it has an opportunity to do anything. Then he moves to the story of Jesus and the disciples in the boat, and a storm blows up and threatens to swamp them, but Jesus commands the winds and the waves to be still. After this account Jesus will go on to heal a woman of a hemorrhage and then to raise the daughter of Jairus from the dead as the culmination of the chapter and the teaching that Luke is trying to give.

Luke is building the case for Jesus being the son of God and if he is the Son of God then Theophilus, to whom the Gospel is written, can have confidence in placing his faith and trust in him, and by extension so can we. What is the purpose of Jesus? Put simply, his mission is to restore humanity to its fullest expression, and to enable all people to come into a right relationship with God by the forgiveness of sins wrought by his death on the cross. His mission is the fore runner for the mission that the twelve, and subsequent disciples will be engaged in. While in Matthew he sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel, here he is in a gentile area, and seems to be showing to the Jewish disciples that Gentiles are indeed an integral part in the plan of God.

This man is a most uncomfortable person. He is dehumanized. He wears no clothes, he does not fit into human society and to top it all off his dwelling is with the dead, not with the living. In one sense he is a dead man walking. He is not in control of his own body and he is a vision of revulsion to those around him. We all know of people like him, maybe not as extreme, but certainly people we are happy to see out of our sphere of influence.

To try and control such a person they have shackled him, yet even these bonds have been torn apart, and the possession has compelled him into the deserted places which are figuratively the place of Satan. It is in the wilderness where Satan tempts Jesus.

Now on one level this passage can be quite confronting. To alleviate this discomfort we might think about the passage as an allegory. We might say that the possession simply represents anything that stops us from being fully ourselves. This is to deny what is happening in the account. There is a personal aspect to the whole question of this possession. Jesus questions the man, but the demon responds. The demon asks Jesus for mercy, something that the demon is not willing to give to the possessed person. This is all very personal and all very real.

This passage reminds us that there truly is evil out there, but we are not to be frightened of it because Jesus has overcome the evil. Now I know that some say that there is no such thing. That is one of the reasons the main message board has what is written on it. It highlights the absurdity of such an argument. God does not believe in atheists, therefore atheists do not exist. Of course they exist. Just because you do not believe in something does not mean it does not exist.

Therefore for an atheist to simply say I do not believe in God therefore God does not exist, is just as silly as saying what is on the board. Just because we might not believe in evil, or in Satan does not make such a reality null and void. We can not, as much as we would like, to wish such a thing away. The reality is that evil does exist, and it can consume us, and control us. It might not be our preference but it can and does happen. The Gospel passage tells us that in Jesus there is a person who is able to overcome such things. Such horrors do not put him off, or overcome him, and so we can have faith and trust in such a person.

Jesus was on a mission to heal people and to bring them to full humanity and to incorporate them fully in the life of God. He did this in a way that demonstrated to his followers what he was on about, and the inference was that they would follow in his footsteps, which they did. You and I are the inheritors of that tradition and we are likewise called to bring people into full relationship with God in Christ Jesus and to assist them reaching their full potential as human beings.

Because there is evil out there we are engaged in a struggle with that evil which, because there is an appointed time for the final judgment, seems determined to wreak as much havoc on people in the meantime. However, we should not lose heart, or even be afraid, because Jesus is able to overcome all things.

In being baptized as young Robert is this morning, we are called to participate in that mission and ministry in our own lives, but we are also called to live out our lives in the fullness of humanity confident that we can not be overcome by evil. We can have confidence that because Jesus has overcome evil, we will not be overcome by it when we put our faith and trust in him. We may see it in all its ugliness, we may be shocked by it, we may be repulsed by it, but that is all it can do to us if we belong to Jesus, because it can not overcome him.

Being called to be a Christian is not just about coming to church and being nice to people. It is about that, but it is also about being willing to make a difference in people's lives, to be concerned about the human condition to a point that we want to go out and help transform lives by the presentation of the good news of Jesus.

It is about being concerned by injustice, and wanting to see it transformed so that people may live fulfilled lives, it is about going to where humanity is sometimes at its darkest, and being willing to transform it by shedding the light of Christ in that dark place.

Christianity is not for the faint hearted, but when we are Jesus is there to sustain us, it is not for the weak, but because we are weak we are able to do mighty things, it is not for the frightened, but when we are Jesus calms our fears. You see Christianity takes us ordinary nondescript people and through the power of God transforms us into amazing people able to do extraordinary things.

Take the example of St. Peter, a simple fisherman, bare reading and writing skills, but Jesus said to you Peter, I will build my church. Moses, slow of speech, yet called to lead the nation of Israel, John Wesley, more than likely a person suffering from depression, and yet called to conduct great missions call thousands to faith in Christ and write beautiful hymns, William Wilberforce a simple politician, but called to campaign to end slavery. It was a nondescript Polish priest Max Kolbe who faced evil in Auschwitz and offered his life so that someone else could live, lived on and saw many other members of his family come into being.

Ordinary people who became extraordinary people, not through their own efforts, but because they placed their lives in the hands of God.

The writer to the Hebrews reminds us that faith is the assurance of things hoped for and the conviction of things not seen. We hope for life in Christ, and our assurance is the resurrection of Jesus on that first Easter day. We are convinced of life beyond this when we place our faith and trust in Jesus, but we do not see this yet. All we have are the words of assurance written in the scriptures, handed down to us by eyewitnesses to that event. While it may seem incredible to us now, what must it have been like at the time?

Yet the church has continued for 2000 years, and has grown and affected the lives of more people than possibly any other faith system in the world.

When we are baptized we are baptized into that hope, and to that assurance that whatever the world may throw at us, we are equipped to handle it. Not because of who we are, but because of who Jesus is.

This day we baptize young Robert into a relationship with Jesus the Christ, the son of God, who has authority over the wind and the waves, who has authority over evil, who has authority over life, and death. And in doing so we do more than just do a ritual, we do more than just have an excuse to have a party.

We invite him on an exciting journey of discovery about himself, and about the world he lives in through the eyes of God, and the opportunity and invitation by that God to make a difference in the world in which he is a part of. He is invited to look at the good things of life and the uncomfortable things in life, and the downright scary things in life, and see how he can make a positive difference through his relationship with Jesus. He will do that by saying his prayers, reading his bible, engaging with other Christian men and women, and by asking God for forgiveness, and repenting of his mistakes. As he does all this he will grow in the life God has for him, and he will be fully human. He might not see humanity at its darkest, as Jesus and others did, but if he does all that he will be equipped to do so effectively. And by the way, that invitation that is extended to Robert today, is open to each of us, and especially those of us who are baptized in the name of the Father, and of the Son , and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.