

Sermon preached at Eaglehawk Uniting Church

21/4/13 by Rev Ralph Clarke. Baptism.

Readings: Rev. 7:9-17; Psalm 23; John 10:22-30;

In the reading from John's gospel Jesus says to the Jewish leaders, "You do not believe because you do not belong to my sheep." For sheep, read people. There's a link between believing in Jesus and belonging to him. Which comes first? Some Christians say believing must come even before baptism, but here, belonging precedes believing. So this morning I thought I would look at why belonging is important.

Campbell and Hudson already know a bit about belonging in their family. They have learned that they belong to their parents who have cared for them - feeding and cleaning them, playing with them, helping them to sleep and to learn things. They have learned that their parents know them, what their cries mean, what is important to them, what they like and dislike and so on. They have learned that even when they are upset or naughty their parents are there for them. The boys begin to sense that they are surrounded by a special love.

These boys are also aware of belonging to a larger family of relatives and friends who phone each other, get together, talk and have fun together. Now in baptism, we are celebrating that they belong to Christ, and to his church. Baptism unites us to Christ, and to the church which is all those who acknowledge that they belong to Christ.

Belonging to God and to the church is different from many of the other things we might choose to belong to like a footy club, or rotary or a school. Belonging to God begins with God's choice of us rather than a choice we make. God's choice is to love us before we deserved that, before we knew about that love. By helping these children belong to God we are linking them to God's purpose which is for people to live in a world marked by love, forgiveness, justice, hope and peace rather than hatred, retribution, selfishness, despair and violence. God wants the very best for us. Baptism is God's call to share in this life, to belong to the community of those who strive to live in this way.

Belonging means much more than affiliating with a particular church, or, believing the same things as others believe. In the end, belonging has to do with a deeper relationship with Jesus. We can see this in the reading when it talks about Jesus knowing his people and about his people hearing his voice. These images were used to describe the relationship of a Jewish Shepherd to a mob of sheep. A Jewish shepherd lived with his sheep, knew their needs and protected them day and night. The sheep literally knew the shepherd's voice and trusted him. They felt secure when he was there. They followed the shepherd instead of being driven as many farmers do in Australia. I think the relation of parents and children might be a better image than sheep of the relationship between Jesus and ourselves.

Jesus says belonging comes before believing. But believing is also important. In the baptism service we called Matthew and Sarah to provide a Christian home and life so the boys will learn the way of Christ. We asked them to encourage their children to grow within the fellowship of the church so they may come to faith in Christ. Belonging is meant to lead to believing and to gradually experiencing more of God's love and purpose.

In the other readings today people have grown close to God through tough experiences in life. We heard John's grand vision of the people of God, multitudes of them, all sorts of people, past and present, gathered around Jesus the Lamb of God, who is seated on the throne of God – and worshipping God. Notice who is there at worship – people who have been through the great persecutions suffered by the early church, people from all over the world, those who have been hungry, thirsty and needy, those who have been bullied and abused, who have suffered racist taunts and shed many tears, all gathered together around the throne of the Lamb. John's vision is of a people united by their life in Christ, a people who have little else in common except faith in Christ. This is the belonging we would love these boys to share.