

Reading: Isaiah 40:21-31, Mark 1:29-39

Loving God you have good news for us, help us hear it.
In Jesus name.
Amen.

It's brilliant to welcome Sebastian into the family of God through his baptism this morning.

It's funny what we remember of our childhood when we grow up. I remember my grandfather really well even though he died when I was just 7. He lived here in Christchurch and one of the things I remember well was him on the telephone. In his lifetime telephones had been invented. Nowadays of course we can't leave home without them but back then a telephone was a big deal. His number and the number of the local fish and chip shop were only one number different so he used to get frustrated with people ringing up with their orders. Rather than tell them their mistake he used to say: "A scoop and two fish, that will be about 10 minutes." The other thing he used to do was to shout down the line something chronic. One day my dad said, "Grandad, you don't need to shout down the line." "I do," he said, "the other person is such a long way away."

Sometimes we are like my grandfather with God. We think God is such a long way away. As a result our prayer, our talking with God can become like a shouting match.

In today's reading we see Jesus doing some amazing stuff, healing and preaching and the like. The crowds are pressing in on every side, everyone wants to touch him and get, as we say, in his grill. In this situation how does Jesus sustain himself, how does he renew his energy? Verse 35 tells us: "In the morning while it was still very dark, he got up and went out to a deserted place and he prayed." Jesus would have known the passage from our first Bible reading today from Isaiah: "For those who wait on the Lord shall renew their strength, they shall mount up with wings like eagles, they shall run and not be weary, they shall walk and not faint."

I want to suggest today that one of the most important things we can do for Sebastian as he grows up is to teach him to pray. I have lots of reasons for saying this.

The trouble with saying we can teach him to pray is that many of us have very little idea ourselves.

A recent survey done on 12,000 Anglicans in America discovered that the most important thing they said the church could do for them was to teach them to pray.

But what is prayer? Prayer is talking with God. Unlike my grandfather thinking that he was talking to people far away, we discover, as the Bible says, that God is closer to us than our own breath.

When I was young I used to think that prayer was asking God for things. So before I went to sleep at night I had long list of people and things that I wanted God to bless. I was especially close to my grandad so God bless grandad. I loved our cat, so God bless the cat. I didn't always like my sister, so she would only occasionally get a mention. When I was about 12 something very weird happened. I discovered that in prayer I could listen to God as well. It was like a telephone conversation and I needed to leave space for God to talk too. We call this contemplative prayer or meditation, and it was a breakthrough point for me. We don't need to be super holy. We just need an attitude of openness. I'm sure when Jesus prayed he had stuff he wanted to ask of God, but I am really sure that he waited on God too - in silence. Silence, they say, is God's first language.

So why teach this to little Sebastian? Because we want the very best for him.

Another piece of research tells us what the biggest single factor is in children growing to be successful adults. It seems that being happy and having satisfying relationships isn't what we think. It's not how rich we are, or how healthy we are, or where we are born, but how good we are at delaying our gratification and that is what waiting is.

The cunning scientists took some very little kids in a room with some marshmallows. "Leave eating the marshmallows," they said, "for two minutes and you get a whole bag." The kids who could do this at two years old grew up to be happier. The reason is of course that if you can delay your gratification, if you can wait, then you are able to achieve an education, you can have deeper relationships, you can save and you can pray.

Learning to pray, learning to listen to God not only transforms our spiritual lives, it transforms all of our lives.

A time spent in prayer each day is not an add-on to a busy life. It is, on the contrary, what gives life meaning and purpose and joy in the first place.

Joy Cowley one of our best children's authors also writes about prayer and she puts it like this.

"Don't call me..."