



A sermon for the Cathedral Eucharist at Wells Cathedral, preached on Sunday 30 August by the Reverend Rosey Lunn, Priest Vicar.

Which way are you facing?

Readings: *Exodus 3, 1-15; Matthew 16, 21 to end*

One of the joys of this season of late summer is the glory of sunflowers.

If you have ever driven past a field of sunflowers in the morning – and then driven past again later in the afternoon, what do you notice? That their faces have turned in a new direction – as they have turned towards the sun – which seems to have moved around, though as we know, thanks to Copernicus, it's actually the earth which has moved – the sun stays in the same place. But the sunflowers know that it's the sun to which they are drawn, and so they turn to face it.

In our service this morning, Freddie will be baptised: he will set out in a new direction on his life's journey. For Freddie, that's the decision of his parents who have brought him here today: they have chosen to set him on this path; and during the ceremony of baptism, they will be asked (on behalf of Freddie) 'Do you turn to Christ?' - and they will answer (I hope!) 'I turn to Christ'.

But in the early years of the Church, it wouldn't have happened quite like this.

Baptism was always the sign of a new beginning in the Christian faith: Jesus himself was baptised in the River Jordan by his cousin John, and later he instructed his disciples to go into all the world, baptising people - perhaps in a river, or a lake – wherever there was water; water was poured over them, 3 times in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.

Gradually as whole households were baptised, it became the practice for the children of those households to be baptised along with the adults; but generally, baptism was for adults who had made the decision for themselves.

During the 4th Century, as Christianity grew to be the official religion under the Roman Empire, it became the practice for adult candidates to receive rigorous training for baptism during the 40 days of Lent – and then they were finally

baptised during the dramatic Easter Vigil on Easter Eve, not as we have it here at the Cathedral quite early in the evening, but in the middle of the night – and then, just as the dawn of Easter day was first appearing in the sky, they would descend into the water, in their white robes, and come up, – turning to face the dawning light of Easter in the East. In doing this, they were turning their backs on darkness, on evil, on their old lives, and turning towards the light of Christ, to swear their allegiance to him, and make a new start.

So essentially, baptism is about turning in a new direction towards God.

In our first reading, we heard how Moses turned to face a new direction - because God spoke to him. There he was, minding his own business – or at least, his father-in-law's business - a responsible job, looking after a flock of sheep. He'd had to escape from all the troubles in Egypt – his people suffering harsh conditions in slavery, which had so enraged Moses that he'd killed one of the Egyptian slave drivers who was beating one of Moses' fellow Israelites, and he'd fled to the safety of Midian, and a peaceful life on his father in law's farm. And there he could have stayed, quite contentedly – until one day he happened to see a bush burning up for no apparent reason and heard the voice of God speaking to him. And what did Moses say?

'I must *turn aside* and see this bush, and why it is not consumed....'; and once he'd turned aside, then it was that God set him off in a new direction; all sorts of adventures were in store for him that he'd never expected – all because he 'turned aside', and allowed God to speak to him, and guide him into the future. Life would certainly have been easier if he'd stayed looking after the flock of his father-in-law Jethro; but instead, he accepted the challenge, as the hymn puts it,

*'Not for ever in green pastures
would we ask our way to be..
but the steep and rugged pathway
would we tread rejoicingly.'*

The poet R.S.Thomas wrote so beautifully about this in his poem The Bright Field,

*Life is not hurrying
on to a receding future, nor hankering after
an imagined past. It is the turning
aside like Moses to the miracle
of the lit bush, to a brightness*

*that seemed as transitory as your youth
once, but is the eternity that awaits you.*

That 'eternity that awaited him' was for Moses the new direction that his life was to take.

And in our Gospel reading, Jesus challenged any would-be followers of his to turn and travel along with him in *his* direction, a way that for him would lead to the cross - certainly a steep and rugged pathway. I will always remember, on a trip to the Holy Land, driving the long road leading south, from the lush, gentle countryside around Galilee, to the city of Jerusalem. The landscape became increasingly arid, rocky, bleak, the road uphill. How determined Jesus must have been to keep going, I thought, how courageous. But he had told his disciples that he *must* go to Jerusalem and undergo great suffering...and be killed...and on the third day be raised. His closest friends couldn't understand it – '*God forbid it Lord, this must never happen to you!*' But it would, and it did – and furthermore, Jesus warned that this path of suffering could be what lay in store for anyone who really wanted to follow him – it was the way of the cross; his followers would be challenged to take up their own crosses – whatever those might be. And yet – wonderfully, mysteriously - that would be the way in which those who followed would find their life – their true selves.

I think there are many people whose lives have been turned in a new direction as a result of sitting in this Cathedral and hearing the challenge to discipleship.... maybe in a sermon, or a conversation with someone who is willing to share their faith story; maybe stirring music; perhaps at an ordination service....

Thirty years ago, I sat in this Cathedral with my then husband David during an ordination service – it was in the early years of women's ordination, and I had only recently come into the Church of England, and suddenly there was a burning bush moment, and I turned to David and said 'That could be me!' - and he said 'Go for it Rosey!' It wasn't an easy journey (after all, Jesus had warned his followers that most likely it wouldn't be!) In fact, that lovely encouraging husband was to die of cancer just 6 months later, leaving me a widow with 2 young children, and I wondered sometimes if it would ever work out; but thank God it did, I did 'go for it', and my life turned in a new direction.

Might there be someone here today whose life may also turn in a new direction? Do you have a choice to be made? A challenge to face – which could make you take a step in a new way?

A different job? A calling to take up a new way of life? Have you thought about being baptised or confirmed – or even ordained? Or perhaps just a different way of thinking about or dealing with a difficult situation in which you feel stuck? Perhaps you might change your mind about something – or allow it to be

changed? There are so many directions in which you could travel from today onwards – if you turn aside and hear what God might be saying to you.

The question is asked of those bringing a child for baptism – 'Do you turn to Christ?'

And that is a question for every one of us, every day – consciously to turn to face towards Christ; just as sunflowers, each hour of every day, slowly turn their faces towards the light of the sun – because that is what they are made to do; and so we, too, find our true purpose, our life - by constantly re-affirming that promise made at our baptism: 'I turn to Christ.'

How sad it must be to feel that our days of turning in a new direction are over – that we're too old, or set in our ways, to turn and face a new way. I think of that line in T.S.Eliot's poem *Ash Wednesday*: 'Because I do not hope to turn again,, because I do not hope, Because I do not hope to turn...I no longer strive towards such things..' the poet has no hope that his life is going to change or that he will again find joy - all because he has lost his faith. He feels as though his life and fate are out of his control; it is the spiritual struggle of an alienated individual lacking faith in decayed modern culture.

But we *can* hope to turn our faces to the light – as this lovely hymn puts it:

*In a world where people walk in darkness
Let us turn our faces to the light
to the light of God revealed in Jesus
to the Daystar scattering our night*

*In a world where suff'ring of the helpless
Casts a shadow all along the way,
Let us bear the Cross of Christ with gladness
And proclaim the dawning of the day.*

*For the light is stronger than the darkness
And the day will overcome the night.
Though the shadows linger all around us,
Let us turn our faces to the light.*

Freddie, your little face is being turned towards the light as you are baptised today; may you continue to flourish in that light, and to walk in it all the days of your life, whatever challenges you may face.

And when the end of the journey comes – which for most of us here is not as far distant as when we were the age of Freddie, when there are no more turns to take, we come at last to face the sun towards which we have been travelling, and we might echo the sentiments of this little poem by the 20th century, poet Evangeline Paterson, 'And That will be Heaven':

*And that will be heaven
at last – the first unclouded
seeing
to stand like the sunflower
turned full face to the sun drenched
with light in the still centre
held while the circling planets
hum with an utter joy
seeing and knowing
at last in every particle
seen and known and not turning
away
never turning away
again*

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Priest Vicar

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