

## **Chosen – Ephesians 1:3-14**

Today is a special day, because Rebecca, Thomas and James have been baptised into the Christian faith. And we celebrate that together. Praise God. Hallelujah.

Rebecca, Thomas and James haven't done anything to "earn" their baptism, and neither has Tim or Sara or Shane, godparents. If you think back to their baptism earlier this morning, before I baptised him, I asked some questions just to check that everyone was clear on the faith into which they were being baptised. Do you believe in God? Do you believe in Jesus Christ? Do you believe in the Holy Spirit? And so on.

And then after they were baptised, I turned to Rebecca, Tim, the boys' godparents, and then everyone and asked that you all respond to God's grace, by making some commitments. To encourage growth within the Christian community, joining in the life of the Church and so on.

But those commitments came after the baptism. You could have all upped and left the moment after I said for the third time, "...I baptise you In the name of the Father, And of the Son, And of the Holy Spirit", and no one would have been any less baptised.

Because baptism isn't earned. Not by Rebecca, not by James or Thomas, not by Tim or the boys' godparents, and not by any of us. It is God's free gift to all God's people.

And this is reflected in our reading this morning from Paul's letter to the Ephesians – it is a wonderful reminder of that God has done for us.

Paul begins by praising God, who, he says, has blessed us in the heavenly realms with every spiritual blessing in Christ. (1:3)

And in the first thing that thanks God for in his praise is for choosing us. For he chose us in him before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in his sight (1:4). Even before the world was formed, God knew each one of us. God had already planned to create us, and decided to call us into relationship with him. God chose us to be part of his family, and then, in Jesus, provided the way for us to become part of that family.

God chose us, in Christ. We can be confident of that. Even when our plans don't work out the way we expect or hope or want, we can rely on that truth: That God has chosen us, and no choice of ours – no matter how bad or ridiculous or hopeless that choice turns out to be – can take that away.

Sometimes we think of being chosen by God as something that makes us more important – that makes us in some way 'better' than others. People often assume that churches are full of good people. That God only wants good people as his followers. But Jesus said he came to save sinners, not the righteous. And if you think about it, if there was nothing wrong, we wouldn't need to be saved.

The Christian church is not an exclusive club – we let anyone in. In fact, we welcome anyone: Whatever people's background, whatever they've done – or haven't done – they are called to be part of God's family, and we welcome them. Or at least we should welcome them – because sometimes, throughout history, has got it wrong.

Paul tells us that we have been chosen to be holy and blameless before God in his sight. Holy and blameless. That sounds pretty good, doesn't it. Do you feel holy and blameless? Who among us thinks they are holy and blameless? I'm not holy and blameless, and I'm guessing you're not, either. As Paul reminds us in his letter to the Romans (3:10), none of us are – Paul says "There is no one righteous, not even one;". The ancient nation of Israel wasn't. The church certainly isn't. And none of us as individuals are, either.

And that is why we need a saviour. We need one who is holy and blameless. We need Jesus, who truly is God's chosen one. We don't always get it right – we won't always get it right. Jesus is God's only begotten son, God's beloved, in whom God is well pleased. He is the light to the nations. He is the promised descendent of Abraham. He is the one in whom all nations, all peoples, are to be blessed. And we who place our trust in him, in this chosen one, are adopted into his family.

We haven't just been chosen, Paul reminds us: We have been chosen in Christ. And as the next verses go on to remind us, we have been brought into God's family through Jesus, [in whom] we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins, in accordance with the riches of God's grace that he lavished on us (1:8)

Paul isn't just sharing a theory here, he's talking about things he not only understood, but had experienced.

In his first letter to Timothy, Paul wrote: "I thank Christ Jesus our Lord, who has given me strength, that he considered me trustworthy, appointing me to his service. Even though I was once a blasphemer and a persecutor and a violent man, I was shown mercy because I acted in ignorance and unbelief." (1 Timothy 1:12-13)

Paul says he was a blasphemer, a persecutor and a man of violence. We read about him in the early part of the book of Acts – he stood by and watched and approved as Stephen was stoned to death. He arrested men, women and children, simply because they'd begun following Jesus.

And yet, God saved him. There's no way Paul had earned God's favour, if you think about what he'd done, if anything he'd earned God's anger: but here in his letter to the Ephesians, Paul says we have received redemption through Jesus' blood, the forgiveness of sins, in accordance with the riches of God's grace

And in response to God's grace, Paul became a great and faithful servant of God, sharing the good news of Jesus across the known world.

You might know John Newton's words from the hymn "Amazing grace... that saved a wretch like me". God's grace, God's amazing grace, saved a wretch like John Newton, who was a slaver.

And God's grace saved a wretch like Paul, the blasphemer, the persecutor the man of violence.

We might not be slavers, we might not even be particularly blasphemers, or persecutors of the church or even people of violence. But God's amazing grace is there for us too. For each one of us, no matter what we've done, or how bad we've been, or even if we've been just quietly getting on with our lives.

And God's amazing grace is there for Rebecca and Thomas and James. And in their baptism today, we have publicly claimed and acknowledged that grace for each of them.

Throughout the gospels we see Jesus calling people to follow him. Choosing them to come to him, and follow him. People from all backgrounds and all walks of life and all ages. He's called Tim and Rebecca and Thomas and James, and me and you. Throughout the ages, people have been chosen and called to him.

We can all look at our lives and see things that are wrong, things that we know should be changed but we lack the means – or maybe the motivation to change them. And we can look at our society and our world and see things that we know are wrong, but again we lack the means or the motivation to fix them.

There's a saying that Jesus meets us wherever we are, but he isn't content to let us stay there. Sure enough, as we are called by Jesus, if we choose to respond, we grow in our faith, and we will be

changed... we won't be made perfect this side of the new creation, but we will be changed. Just as Paul the persecutor was. Just as John Newton the slaver was.

It probably won't always be an easy or smooth change, but Jesus will be patient with us. No matter how many times we do the wrong thing, Jesus will still love us, and still forgive us.

In our service of baptism today, we have recognised God's grace as God's gift to Rebecca, to Thomas and to James, but his amazing grace is God's gift to us all as well. All we need to do is recognise that we are chosen, turn to him in faith, put our trust in him, and respond to him in gracious obedience.

So that we can claim our inheritance until the redemption of those who are God's possession, God's chosen —to the praise of his glory.

Amen.