

Follow Me – Canon Neil Patterson

7th June 2026 (1st Sunday after Trinity) with the baptism of Jordan Walker

Genesis 12.1-9, Romans 4.13-end, Matthew 9.9-13, 18-26

The Lord said to Abram, 'Go...'

There are times when everything fits together terribly well. As I think I have said before, and certainly will again, this Sunday after Trinity is the point when the Church's year moves, from telling God's story to our story of life with God. The story of God in Christ, told through Christmas, Easter and Pentecost, reached its conclusion in the doctrine of the Trinity celebrated last Sunday. From today we reflect on our call to follow Christ in the light of that revelation.

And it is simply brilliant that we do so on this day when a new disciple, Jordan Henry Walker, is baptized into the faith. Baptisms of infants tend to occur on slightly random dates to suit families, which is fine, but his mother is a theologian and so I am happy to give full credit that it was planned to assist the message this morning! Because this baptism, any baptism, reminds us all of our own baptisms, when we in our turn, whether as infants or adults, were called, like Matthew, to follow Jesus, and like Abram, to go to new places with God. And if you are not baptised and want to be, talk to us afterwards – it's never too late.

Yet this is not a call into uncharted terrain. It is rather, I suggest, both for Jordan and for all of us, a matter of stepping into a complex but hopeful inheritance. This is suggested by the readings, whereby Paul links the call of faith back to the ancient journey of Abraham, and Jesus heals a woman, not only from a physical ailment, but from the marginalization of uncleanness and exclusion in her community. But it is suggested too by the name of our candidate – whilst his parents do admit that they are fans of a sportsman of the same name too, he really is being named after St Jordan of Bristol, and so is a fresh link to the inheritance of faith that has been practised on this site, we confidently believe, for over 1400 years.

It may be that when I mention an inheritance, you think of the 'inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled and unfading, kept in heaven for you' referred to in 1 Peter 1, especially if you have sung those words as part of S.S. Wesley's anthem, *Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ*. There is indeed a heavenly inheritance, for Jordan and for us all, from our baptisms. But I want us to think a little about our less comforting earthly inheritance of faith, into which Jordan is joined today.

When arranging a baptism, one of the duties of the clergy is to attempt, with whatever skill we may possess, to impart some understanding of what is going to happen to the family concerned, some inkling of the theological meaning of the sacrament. That through the pouring of water their child is given a new birth into the death and resurrection of Christ. That was not really necessary with the Walkers. Instead, Alison sent us an academic article on baptism she had read recently, which offered a fascinating but extremely challenging perspective.

You see, it turns out that, along with the more obvious atrocities of whips and chains and arbitrary death, the world of the transatlantic trade in enslaved Africans also involved a dispiriting corruption of baptism. Enslaved people were often baptized on masse, and far from symbolizing the new life of freedom in Christ, this was a tool to eradicate their native identities by giving them new 'Christian' names, and to assert the cultural superiority of the colonial powers, Britain among them. Truly, there is no gift of God so good that human sin cannot taint it.

In a less drastic way, those of us who have our inheritance here at Bristol Cathedral have to accept that this has often been a place of privilege or ineffectiveness. Beautiful as the eastern arm of this church is, it was largely built as a 'tame monastery' by the wealthy Berkeley family, where they could bury their dead, be faithfully prayed for, and pack off the sons who clearly weren't cut out as soldiers or politicians. If they were lucky, that thereby bequeathed a wise uncle monk to the next generation. In the 18th century most of the clergy considered the canonries so poorly paid, by their standards, that they were held in plurality and the Cathedral seldom visited. All this, along with of course so much good, is part of our inheritance and that into which Jordan enters today.

So how, at this starting point of his baptized life, and this pivot of the Christian year, might we find confidence that our journeys in faith as baptized Christians are serving the good that God would have us do? Can we escape the niggling sense that we will find a way to justify ourselves and how we would like things to be? Of course, never completely, this side of heaven. But there are two ways, from our readings, which may help.

The first is to consider again whether we have heard the call, like Abram and Matthew, and whether it has changed us. As Genesis tells it, Abram had faith, left his home city, travelled far, had strange experiences with God, accepted his new name, Abraham, and became the ancestor of the Jewish people. Matthew left the tax booth, presumably abandoning a well-paid job, to follow Jesus. And St Jordan of Bristol, in the fullest version of his story, was from a Christian family in Rome, of Middle Eastern origin as his name suggests, who joined up with

St Augustine on his mission to what must have seemed the horribly damp, cold island of Britain, to convert those oafish, barbarian, flaxen-haired Angles and Saxons who had recently taken over. Little would he have expected to live out his days on the rainy future site of College Green.

Counterfactual history, even counterfactual autobiography, is obviously inherently difficult. But I invite you to consider whether your life would be any different if you had not heard the call to follow Jesus, whether in baptism as an infant which you came to accept later, or as an adult. Every life is different and I don't know enough about so many of yours. But if you can honestly say that being a Christian has made absolutely no difference, may I plead you to prayerfully consider whether you need to think again.

The second way is to attend more fully to what Jesus does for the sick child and the woman with the haemorrhage. Yes, he brings healing, as to so many. But he also restored relationships. The child is restored to her grief-stricken father, and hope given back to their household. The woman, boldly defying any taboo not to touch Jesus, is cleansed from a defiling illness and able to reconnect with her society. And so we may ask – are we living as agents of Jesus? Does the way we live bring healing of heart and soul to others, enabling connection and love in communities, striving against all the forces which atomise our world and tempt people to selfishness and sin.

We have, of course, no idea what sort of life little Jordan will grow up to lead. And it may be difficult for him to imagine any other than the clear Christian path which we trust his parents and godparents to set him firmly on. But as we come to celebrate his baptism, and recall our own, we pray that he and we all will live lives that bless the world with love, and give glory to God in the inheritance of Abraham.