

Mass Introduction

Chosen, Named, and Made God's Children

As the parish priest, I don't have a manifesto or an agenda. I do have a view, or vision of what I think a priest's role in a parish is, and what a parish should be. This won't be new to you because I've spoken a lot about it before. Things like fostering community which we've been doing more and more.

In June for example, we, or I, was asking for sponsors for sconces, meals for visiting priests, volunteers for the BBQ in Barton in a way I don't think I could have when I first arrived 2 and a half years ago. So fostering community is a greater part of our culture as a parish family now. And I use the word 'family' intentionally.

Our opening prayer talks about family, and you can find the opening prayer on the Mass sheets we provide with the newsletter. The opening prayer says,

O God, by whom we are redeemed and receive adoption, look graciously upon your beloved sons and daughters, that those who believe in Christ may receive true freedom and an everlasting inheritance.

The prayer speaks about how through adoption, we become God's sons and daughters, and heirs to an everlasting inheritance. So today I want to focus on the word *adoption*. Saint Paul uses it often, but in his world, it meant something far more dramatic than we might imagine today.

Adoption in the Roman World

In our time, adoption often begins from compassion—providing a loving home for a child without present parents. But in ancient Roman, adoption was primarily about inheritance, and the continuity of the family name. A Roman father could choose to adopt someone, even an adult, into his family. And when he did, that adopted person became, in the eyes of the law, as much a child as if they had been born into the family. Back at Easter I spoke a lot about baptism,

the image of water being a source of new life, with our old life to sin being ended, and how our job as Christians is to make that new life to grow. Someone adopted into a rich powerful roman family was also metaphorically born into a new life. They took the family name and gained full inheritance rights. All legal ties to their old family were broken. In many cases, the adopted heir was even more favoured than a natural-born son because they had been chosen.

Imperial Adoption and Public Honour

We see this most vividly in the Roman emperors themselves. An empire isn't a monarchy. The succession of power was not simply from eldest son to eldest son. Instead, the emperor would often adopt the person he judged most worthy to succeed him.

So to sum up, adoption was the deliberate, public choice of a worthy heir. It came with a ceremony, a new name, and the full inheritance of status and wealth, a lot like baptism.

Paul's Theology in a Roman Key

When Saint Paul says in his letters that the Christians have "received adoption as sons" (Galatians 4:5, Romans 8:15), his audience would have understood the magnitude of what he meant. Paul was saying: in baptism, God has done for you what the most powerful father in the Roman world could do for his chosen heir—but on an infinitely greater scale.

John's Gospel says it more plainly: "To all who received Jesus, who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God." So this is how Paul took the Roman concept of adoption and applied it to the church.

A New Name, a New Family

In Roman adoption, the adopted person took on the new family's name. In the early Church, and even in some places today, baptism often included the giving of a new Christian name—Even if we don't change our names, we still take on the noble name of Christian. The emperor's adopted son could, if he failed in loyalty, lose the father's favour. But for us, we're meant to be perfect. When I do marriage prep with

couples I start by telling them there are no wrong answers. I won't go running off to the bishop telling him to stop the wedding! It's the same with us in our own lives. God doesn't take away our adoption. And if this is true—and it is—then it means our baptism isn't just a past event, but is relevant to how we live the present.

The Present

Which brings me to the heart of what I believe the role of a parish—and the role of a priest in a parish—really is: to help people live more and more in that spirit of adoption, and to truly live as God's children. Not just to live, but to live a full spiritual life. Jesus said he came so that we might have life and have it abundantly, to the full! This is why you'll often hear me say that the parish is not just a "Mass centre." Mass is important, Communion is the foundation of our life together, but a foundation is meant to allow other things to be built on top of it. Jesus did not come to start a chain of Mass centres—He came to create the Church which offers us more than just Mass.

The Parish is the physical manifestation of the Church in the local community and is meant to help people discover and live out their identity as God's adopted children, and to live out that identity in a full way. Believing we are God's adopted sons and daughters should change our priorities and should make us want to learn about our Father, learn from our Jesus brother, and grow together as a family of fellow adopted brothers and sisters, or – to go back to a word I used a lot – to grow as a community.

Today's opening prayer prayed that those who believe in Christ and are adopted into his family may "receive true freedom and an everlasting inheritance." That is what God has given us in baptism. He's made us heirs. And it's for us to take ownership of that our inheritance.

Conclusion (and Looking Ahead to Part Two)

Today we've looked at what adoption meant in Paul's world, and what it means for us to be adopted by God in baptism. Next time, we'll look at the practical implications—how I see

this shaping the way we live as a parish. So tune in next week to see how we can live out our baptism here in our parish.