

Sermon given by The Revd. Nicki McNelly on 16.12.18

Those of you who are regular visitors will have noticed we have had a change of liturgical colour today. Usually throughout Advent I wear blue and we have blue or purple frontals, which are penitential colours. Today we change to rose and we lit the pink candle.

This is because we celebrate Gaudete Sunday today, it is like a mid-point break in our waiting and preparations for the coming of the Christ child to celebrate that the time, is indeed, near and we rejoice in that nearness.

The Scriptural base for this, is our first reading from Philippians, 'Rejoice in the Lord, always'. And what better way to rejoice than having a baby and bringing them for Baptism.

It is lovely to see so many people here today and I believe it is actually a 'welcome back' for some of Sophie's friends and families. In fact, her mum was baptised here and attended Sunday School.

For those of you who are visitors, I would like to tell you that I always begin a baptism sermon with a baptism joke. My only problem is that there are not that many baptism jokes and those there are, are pretty corny.

So here goes:

Once upon a time, a priest asks the mother what the baby's name is to be. The reply was 'Homer'. 'I do hope' says the priest 'that he is to be named after the Greek poet – the author of the Iliad- and not that dreadful TV cartoon character!' 'Oh, neither', replies the puzzled mother;' his father keeps pigeons.'

Yes, I know, it's terrible.

Anyhow, when you go away today, I want you to remember two things about my sermon. (And one of them is not that bad joke.)

No, today I want you to remember that I spoke about love. And penguins. Love and penguins. That's what I want you to remember when you leave St. Cuthbert's.

Today baby Sophie is going to be baptised into the Christian family. Because of the love her family have for her, they have brought her here today with friends

and family to say 'we love her, will you love her too?' And we at St. Cuthbert's are very good at loving babies, aren't we?

And this all got me thinking of penguins. Yes, penguins.

Did you see the programme 'Dynasties' when it showed the journeys the penguins have to endure to care for their babies? And they go through all they do because of the love they have for their babies. My daughter phoned me after she watched it, as she cried through it. She loves penguins.

And that reminded me of a story someone told me ... that God is like a penguin. At least I think that's kind of what she said.

I don't know if you know much about penguins but they are pretty good at giving unconditional love to their own little ones. And when the female penguin lays her egg, it is not her who looks after it until it hatches. No, that is dad's job.

In fact, the daddy penguin has to look after the egg for at least three months in the coldest weather imaginable. Forget a gentle Colinton snow flurry, this is the harshest place on earth.

So, just like God cares for and loves us, so the dad Penguin sacrifices himself for the sake of his eggs. He tucks the egg onto his feet and let's his tummy fold down over it to keep it warm.

Then all the dad penguins huddle together in the arctic blasts, shuffling around, taking turns to be on the outside of the group getting battered by the wind and snow.

That's the kind of love God has for us. God loves us like a penguin.

And then when they hatch, the young end up in a giant crèche. Tens of thousands of them huddle together. Their parents still feed them but how on earth do they recognise them? By their cry.

Just like babies in hospital, the mums can tell by calling and listening, which one of them is theirs. Each cry is unique. Just as each one of us is unique to God.

So today, little Sophie, we are here to say we will love you. We are now part of your family whether you like it or not, as we are with all those baptised here.

We pray that God will be like a penguin to you and love you unconditionally.

No matter what happens to you in your life: the terrible twos, that first acne spot, the heartbreak of the teenage years, the rebellions and the rest, no matter what happens and where you go we will always be here for you.

For we are now part of your family and there is nothing you can do that will change that.

We love you – it is that simple.

So, there we have it. A sermon about love. About love and penguins. Don't forget it.

That's what church is all about. It should be an experience you don't forget and you should leave knowing that God loves you, unconditionally.

Let us pray:

Heavenly Father, as we await the coming of the Christ child, we thank you for your unconditional love for each one of us. Let us rejoice now with Sophie, her family and friends as she is baptised and welcomed into our family, into your family and may the Holy Spirit touch each of our hearts as we journey to Christmas. In Jesus name we pray. Amen.

With thanks to Rev Ruth Innes for the penguin theme (adapted).