

**Sermon: “Why Bother to Baptise?”
given Sunday, October 18, 2009**

Some of you may wonder at times – Why Baptism? Why do parents bring children for baptism into the Church? Perhaps we can understand a bit better with parents and children who are a part of our regular congregation. But even then, with regular churchgoers, they are already part of the Christian community so why bother with Baptism? With families who are not regular members of the Church community, why bring children for Baptism? This question is not meant to make parents seeking Baptism for their child feel in any way embarrassed, but with them I want to explore the meaning of Baptism in a simple way that is hopefully relevant and gives good reasons for baptising a child.

Why do people bring children for Baptism? I guess there could be a whole raft of answers to that question. Some answers are fairly simple and straight forward, and some are really very ill formed and perhaps hard to put into words, even for the most regular churchgoer.

Probably the most simple and common answers are that “It is the right thing to do! I was baptised as a child and we would like our child to be part of that time honoured ritual of baptism,” or “ Mum and Dad and our grandparents expect us to baptise our child and so that is what we want to do.” These are very simple and pragmatic answers and probably at their simplest are the answers all parents would give, whether they are church goers or not.

Another answer to the same question about “Why Baptise?” is often held by parents but less rarely put into words. “We would like our children baptised in case something happens to them. We want to know they are in God’s love and care right from the start. If some tragedy happens to my child, he or she has been baptised and that is important.” And I think most parents deep down have an element of this reason too. It is really a hangover from the old and, I believe, very ill conceived view that a child will not be loved by God, will not go to heaven, unless he or she is baptised. Perhaps there is also a subconscious belief that by baptising our child we are performing a sacred blessing ritual around our child that will keep them from harm and danger – a sort of life insurance policy.

Another reason which is also commonly voiced is that we want our children to be baptised so that they are “signed-up” members of the Christian family. It is then up to them to choose whether they want to be an active part of that family in later life as they grow up.

I think the above are basically the main reasons why parents bring their children for Baptism. There are both elements of truth and of misunderstanding in these simple but understandable answers.

I wish to try and give my own simple but hopefully meaningful and relevant answers to the question “Why baptise a child?”

Firstly, what is the difference between the words “Baptism” and Christening”?

Well, Baptism is the right word to use. It is the word Jesus used himself. Jesus himself was baptised as a sign of his complete desire to serve God and obey the will of God. Christening is a term that no longer has much relevance today and was really only a part of the Baptism service. In Christening the child was given his or her Christian name during the Baptism. In years gone by in the English village system, children were generally baptised not long after they were born and they were named - given their Christian name - at the baptism. They were christened with a Christian name.

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Nowadays that no longer happens. Children are automatically given their names at birth, and christening doesn't happen at baptism except in a purely formal way when we bless the names we have already chosen and have used since the child's birth.

What is Baptism?

It is a special service or ritual of the Church which is called a Sacrament of the Church. Jesus in his life and teaching commended us to do two things as special rituals in our lives - two rituals that we call Sacraments.

Firstly, Baptism. In Matthew's gospel, Ch. 28:19, Jesus says to his disciples as his last command before the end of his earthly ministry “Go and make disciples of all people, baptising them in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit.”

The second ritual or sacrament Jesus commanded us to do when we gather for worship in his name is to regularly partake of Holy Communion – the bread and the wine which, by the Blessing of the Holy Spirit, becomes for us the living power of the Body and Blood of Jesus in us. We need food and water to live and Jesus tells us we also need his food and drink (his body and his blood in the bread and the wine) in order to live on a more deeply spiritual level and in a more completely fulfilled human way.

So what happens at Baptism?

The child or adult to be baptised is brought to the place where the baptism is to occur. Usually it is the piece of furniture in a church called a font. It is just like a sacred wash basin really. The **water** is poured over the child or adult's head three times in the name of God – Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Our God is not 3 gods, but one God only, who acts in our lives in 3 distinct but equal ways as Father, Son and as Holy Spirit.

Then the person baptised has **sacred oil** called “Chrism”, placed on his/her forehead in the form a cross to show he or she is blessed by God and is God's loved child. This oil – this Chrism – is blessed by the Bishop every year for this special purpose.

Then the baptised person is given a **candle** – which is lit from the Easter candle – to signify that he or she is now living in the light and power of the risen Jesus Christ and it is now up to that person in the future to accept and to daily access that light and power through faith and through prayer and trust in God.

Baptism is a sacrament as I said. “Sacrament” is a special jargon church word that means “An outward visible sign of an inward spiritual grace”. The outward visible sign is the water poured over the head 3 times. The inward spiritual grace is the special light and power of God's blessing available in our lives.

The other important thing about Baptism is that it is a sign of membership of the Christian community. A little child cannot of their own accord, make any statement of what the Christian community believes and wants to be part of. Adults to be baptised of course can and do that themselves. So for a child we have godparents or sponsors to say on behalf of the child what that child is effectively becoming part of. There are several questions asked of the Godparents which hopefully they are able, in good faith, to answer as a witness to and on behalf of the child. These questions are:

1. **Do you turn to Christ?** ie. “Do you see Jesus as the one to face, to turn to, as the best guide and example and focus of power for your life?”

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2. ***Do you repent of your sins?*** That is “Do you desire to be a better person than you usually are and to turn away, where possible, from those things you do that you know are wrong and unjust?”
3. ***Do you reject selfish living?*** This is self explanatory, and
4. ***Will you, with God’s help, seek to be a good example to this child of God’s love in action?*** The important thing is that we need God’s help to do this!

The Nicene Creed is then said by the whole congregation as a statement of what we believe. The Nicene Creed is a statement of Christian Faith said and believed by Christians everywhere. We may not fully understand or be able to fully comprehend it, but we accept that it is a statement of what we believe, no matter how falteringly, in common with all Christians across the ages. The Creed we say in the Baptism service is a simplified version of the Nicene Creed.

Importantly, baptism is a ritual of welcome into the Christian family, here and everywhere – no matter what brand or denomination of the Christian church you belong to – it is the same and accepted across all the main churches.

Baptism is an active sign of God’s love and blessing in your life.

Baptism is a sacrament releasing an invisible grace in our lives that we can choose to draw on to guide and empower us or we can just as easily forget about and ignore – but that grace is always there when we need it.

Baptism is not magic. It is not an exclusive action that states you are going to heaven and the unbaptised person is going to some place called hell.

All of us – Christian or non Christian – believer or non-believer – are created by God and loved by God. Baptism acknowledges that love of God and desires to return that love. Baptism acknowledges the extraordinary power and blessing that is available to us to be better people in the world and to cope with all the demands, both good and bad, with which life confronts us.

Baptism publicly welcomes us into the whole family of God as redeemed in the life and death and resurrection of Christ.

Hopefully “Why baptise?” is not such a hard question now to answer. For myself, I am absolutely convinced it is an important, life affirming and life enhancing thing to do on behalf of ourselves and our children and gives us open access to the extraordinary and abundant gifts of God’s love and power through the Holy Spirit.