

Baptism

A resource for parents

This is a resource for those thinking about baptism for their child.

It explains:

- what Christians understand by baptism
- what baptism asks of the parents, the child and the Christian community
- the general format of a baptism service

It gives an overview of:

- the origins of the Christian understanding and practise of baptism
- the richness of its symbolism



We hope it will help families at this starting point on their journey of faith. This is the journey through which we grow in our knowledge and love of God, and deepen our confidence in his desire for our good throughout our lives.

What is Baptism?

Baptism is a sacrament. A sacrament is a visible sign of an invisible reality. In baptism the visible signs of oil, the cross, water and light are used to symbolise the invisible reality of God's love for our child and his saving action in our child's life.

Why do we seek Baptism for our children?

There are many reasons why we might start to think about baptism for our child. For some parents it is marking the arrival of a new family member, or giving the child a 'good start'; for others there may be a family expectation or tradition; for some there may be anticipation of the difficulty of admission to good faith schools.

As Christians we need to be clear about what we are doing.

We believe that through baptism we confirm our child on the journey of faith.

We declare, to ourselves and to those around us, our belief in a loving God and our desire to bring up our child in that belief.

We undertake on our child's behalf to turn away from all that draws us away from God.

We ask for the Church's support to help us to nurture the love of God in our child.

We confirm our membership of the local and worldwide Christian family.

We give thanks to God for the gift of life and of our child.

What are the origins of Baptism and why do we do it?

"...I have the desire to do what is good, but I cannot carry it out..." Romans 7:18

St Paul, in this letter to the Romans, describes something we all recognise: the difficulty of doing the right thing and the temptation to do what is easier or more immediately gratifying. Christian tradition traces this difficulty to "The Fall", the moment in the Garden of Eden when Eve and Adam gave in to the temptation to taste the forbidden apple. The Old Testament is essentially the story of God's patience with human beings who constantly fail to do the right thing.

A recurrent theme is the solemn promise or covenant God makes with his people to assure us of this patience and his desire, always, to call us to himself. These promises are often accompanied by visible signs or reminders of God's faithful love and his call for us to begin again:

Noah, after the flood, was given the rainbow, the sign of God's solemn promise that he would protect the earth and all living things.

Abram and Sarai were given new names, Abraham and Sarah, the sign of the new life they were to lead as Abraham became 'the father of many nations'.

The Red Sea was parted, the sign to the Israelites that God was with Moses as he led them from slavery to freedom in the Promised Land.

Baptism mirrors this: it is a sacrament of initiation or new beginning, which involves making solemn declarations and promises, accompanied by signs and symbols to represent their meaning.



The River Jordan, where John the Baptist baptised Christ

In the Old Testament the idea of covenant is of whole nations recognising that they have gone astray, promising to love God and renewing their efforts to 'do the right thing'.

In the New Testament we see John the Baptist calling individuals, rather than whole nations, to repentance, to renewed desire to live according to God's law. Following the Jewish tradition of ritual cleansing, the outward sign of this renewed commitment was immersion in water.

At the beginning of his public ministry, Jesus comes to John for Baptism, to show publicly, his obedience to the will of His father. At Pentecost, the beginning of the Church, the first thing people are called to do in order to start following Christ is to “repent and be baptised ... and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit” (Acts 2:38)

The writings of the early church contain many accounts of ‘baptism’ as the outward sign of the commitment of individuals to promise solemnly to renew their efforts to love God through following the teachings of Jesus. Our current practice of baptism, and the signs and symbols we use, comes from these Old and New Testament themes and stories.

Signs and Symbols in Baptism

Christian practice has a rich tradition in the use of symbols.

Christians believe that God is at work in all aspects of our daily lives. We use everyday things symbolically to make this invisible action of God visible. This helps us to live more consciously in the presence of God in our everyday life.

Water

Water is both life-giving (without it nothing survives) and cleansing. It is the symbolic and backdrop of many of our bible stories: in the Creation the divine wind swept over the waters, in the story of Noah God purges the earth of sin through the great flood, Moses leads the Israelites through the Red Sea into freedom, the Samaritan woman at the well is offered water to drink.



When the water of baptism is poured over the child's head there is thus a dual symbolism:

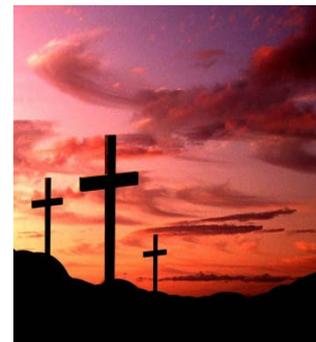
- i) the entering into new life
- ii) the washing away of sin

Cross

The cross has been used since the first century and has become the most universal and recognizable of all symbols of Christianity and Christian belonging.

When the child to be baptised is marked with a cross it looks invisible, but will always be there. It symbolises three things:

- i) belonging: the child now belongs to the Christian community
- ii) love: the love which led Jesus to die for us
- iii) transformation: the pain and death of the cross is transformed into the joy and hope of the resurrection in which we now live and strive to follow Christ



Oil



Anointing the child with oil has two symbolic threads:

- i) the Holy Spirit, present at the baptism of Jesus, is present at the baptism of a child to guide, strengthen and protect the child on his/her Christian journey,
- ii) our vocation as Christians to share Christ's three-fold office of priest, prophet and king, to be expressed in our lives through compassionate living, bearing witness and leading by example.

Light

“receive the light of Christ”-

the light of baptism again has a dual symbolism:

- i) the light of Christ which we are given, to lighten our darkness, to show us the way to live, and which remains with us when life is hard
- ii) the light of Christ which we are called to share with others, by the way that we live and love every day



How do we 'do' Baptism?

The journey to baptism will probably begin with a phone call to your parish priest who will arrange to meet you. S/he will:

- explain what Christians understand baptism to be
- discuss the nature of the commitment you are making
- explore the meaning of the baptismal promises, signs and symbols
- run through the service

Godparents

The Christian tradition is to seek at least two godparents for a child, a godfather and godmother. Their role is to support you, and your child, in the nurture and practice of your faith, now and in the long term. They need to be baptised themselves and actively to share the Christian faith you seek for your child. They should be present at the baptism to make the baptismal promises on your child's behalf.

The Baptism Service

The Rite of Baptism usually takes place at the main Sunday Service in your parish church because:

- it is a public commitment: the promises of baptism need to be made before the congregation
- it confers membership of the Church: your Church community needs to be present to welcome its new member, and to promise its support and prayers.

The Presentation of the Child

The parents and/or godparents are invited to come forward and declare their desire for baptism for the child.

The Decision

The parents and/or godparents declare, on behalf of the child, their intention to: “renounce the devil and all that is evil and turn to Christ.” Sometimes a candle is lit to signify the light of Christ.

The Signing with the Cross

The sign of the cross is made on the child to show that he/she is entrusted to Christ.

Prayer over the Water

A prayer is said over the water in the font asking God to use the water to: cleanse the child from sin and grant the child new life as part of the People of God.

Profession of Faith

The parents, godparents, sometimes the whole congregation, declare their Christian faith through the recitation of the Apostles Creed.

Baptism: takes place at the font

Water is poured over the head of the child as he/she is “baptised in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit.” Sometimes the head of the child is anointed with oil, to represent the outpouring of the Holy Spirit. Sometimes the child is given, or is already dressed, in a white garment to mark the beginning of a new life.

Commission

a prayer is said for the child, that he/she may grow in holiness. Parents and godparents are reminded of their duty to the child.