

## **A sermon on Baptism**

### **Preached Sunday 11<sup>th</sup> July at Farningham**

Well, those of you who arrived early enough to read the notice sheet before the start of the service, or who have been having a sneaky read during the service, will have seen that we plan to Christen (baptise) Georgie on Sunday 5<sup>th</sup> September in the Worship for All service in Eynsford.

As you will also have noticed, we want to Christen her in a slightly different way to that which you might be used to – by fully immersing her, either in the river, or in a pool in Church.

So, I wondered if this morning might be a good time for me to talk a little bit about Christening – what the Bible has to say about it and Anglican practice as I understand it.

As always, you'll find this sermon on the website – at least as soon as Ruth is back from her holiday, and you are very welcome to e-mail me with thoughts, comments or questions.

But firstly, let's make sure we understand the same thing by the words we use. They say, don't they, that the British and the Americans are separated by a common language.

Older people use the word "wicked" to mean bad, whilst younger people use it to mean "good".

If two people use the same word, but to mean different things, then all sorts of misunderstandings can ensue.

So, the word "Christen" never appears in the Bible. The word, "baptise" (Greek: baptizo) does.

We find John the Baptist baptising in the river Jordan to help people prepare for the coming of the Messiah (Mark 1.2-8).

Before his Ascension to heaven Jesus commands his followers to go and make disciples of all nations, baptising them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit (Matthew 28.16-20).

And the early Church baptises people as a sign of their commitment to Christ (Acts 2.14)

The word "baptise" in the original Greek can have a number of meanings: immerse, dip, overwhelm.

So, what of this word “Christen”?

Well, whilst not in the Bible, the word “Christen” is an old one, and probably means, “to make a Christian” or “to bring to Christ”.

And in practice has been used for many centuries to describe the baptism of a baby or infant.

So, in common parlance, the baptism of an adult is a baptism and the baptism of a baby is a Christening.

Technically speaking it’s all baptism!

So, let’s ask some questions about baptism and see what answers we might come up with.

1. Who is baptism for?

The very first people to be baptised were adults; people who came to faith in Jesus and made a commitment to him.

Baptism was the sign of their faith and commitment and the means by which they were incorporated into the Church.

However, in the book of Acts, the history of the early Church, we find two instances of whole households being baptised (Acts 16.15 & 16) ; and because children received the Old Testament sign of belonging to God’s family (circumcision) and because we know from history that the Church was baptising children from the second century, we assume that baptism is also for children – whose parents are Christians and who intend to bring their children up as Christians.

2. What does baptism do?

Well, according to Article 27 of the 39 Articles, baptism is a sign of profession (of faith in Christ) and a mark of difference (of being a Christian).

But according to Article 27 it is more than just symbolic. Something actually happens in a baptism: “as by an instrument, they that receive baptism rightly are grafted into the Church”.

Baptism is part of the process of becoming a Christian and joining the church; hence Peter’s instruction to the crowds at Pentecost to “repent and be baptised” (Acts 2.38) and similarly Ananias’ words to Paul “be baptised and wash your sins away” (Acts 22.16).

But, as Article 27 says, baptism only works for those who receive it rightly – it’s not magic.

So, adults must receive baptism believing in Christ and committing themselves to him.

Children must grow up being taught the faith as part of the church and come to their own adult profession of faith.

Failing to receive baptism rightly, as Article 26 says can result in people “purchas(ing) to themselves damnation”.

### 3. How should baptism be administered?

As far as the Anglican Church is concerned, as long as you use water and the name of the Trinity, it's a baptism!

But, unless, it's an emergency, when anyone can baptise anywhere, baptism should take place in a main Sunday morning service (Canon B21) and be administered by the bishop or parish priest.

The 1662 Book of Common Prayer states that babies should be dipped in water and that adults should be dipped or sprinkled. Children may be sprinkled if too poorly to be dipped.

The more modern Common Worship again allows for dipping or sprinkling.

The advantage of dipping or immersing is that it so vividly speaks of our dying – going down into the water/grave - and rising to new life.

Sprinkling speaks more clearly of God pouring down his grace upon us.

So, why do Helen and I want Georgie baptised by immersion rather than sprinkling?

Well, whilst I was baptised by sprinkling as a baby, Helen was baptised in the river Tavy in Devon by immersion aged sixteen.

Adopting a good Anglican compromise, and because I'm so passionate about baptising infants, we've had our other three children baptised as baby's like me – but by immersion, like Helen. And we'd like to do the same for Georgie.

We'd also love to do the service at the river, if possible, because it will make it so much more public – a witness to the love of Christ to the local community.

We don't expect everyone to want the same thing as us.

But some people might.

### 4. If someone has been Christened as a baby, can they be baptised as an adult?

I get asked this question more often than you might think, generally by adults who were Christened as a baby, Confirmed at a young age without really realising what it was about, and who then as adults have come to a significant faith in Christ.

They want to be baptised by immersion as a sign of this full adult faith and commitment to Christ.

However, the answer is that it is not possible to be baptised in this instance.

St Paul writes that there is “One Lord, One faith, One baptism” (Ephesians 4.5).

You can only be baptised once, as you can only become a Christian once.

Someone who was baptised as a baby, obviously at the time knowing nothing about what was going on but beginning a journey of faith nonetheless, needs to do is not be baptised again, but to own their infant baptism for themselves.

If they’ve never been Confirmed, Confirmation is the way to do this, where there is opportunity to state one’s baptism vows for one’s self.

If you have already been Confirmed, the public renewing of baptism vows, with or without water, is an appropriate and valuable step.

5. What would I hope to see happen here in this benefice?

Well, I hope we will baptise many babies and infants, as parents express their desire for their children to grow up as Christians as part of the Church.

I hope many adults who aren’t Christians will come to faith in Christ, and either be baptised, Confirmed or renew their baptism vows as a sign of this faith.

We may wish to consider whether baptisms are better done in a main morning service; but where they aren’t I will invite baptism families back to a subsequent main morning service to receive their baptism certificate. In this way we can make the link between the newly baptised and the church.

And as the Prayer Book offers both, I suggest that we offer people the choice of baptism either by sprinkling or immersion.

More important than all these things, I pray that as we administer baptism and as people receive it rightly, people might experience God’s love and grace, and the joy of being part of the biggest and best family on earth!