



# THE PARISH OF SAINT PAUL, NEW SOUTHGATE, LONDON N11



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## Adult Baptism – Some Frequently Asked Questions

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### Q. What is the meaning of it all ?

A. The Greek word *baptizein* means 'plunging', 'immersing' or 'drowning' and baptism would have been a familiar symbol in first century Palestine. Religious leaders adopted their disciples through baptism and we know of John the Baptist who was baptising people as a sign of repentance. Baptism was both a radical call to 'repent' (to turn around and rethink your way of life) and also a re-enactment of the great Jewish liberation of the people of Israel through the Red Sea. In this way John was asking his followers to join his renewal movement based.

Jesus was also baptised by John, when the Spirit descended upon him like a dove and after which he began his ministry. Matthew's Gospel ends with the Great Commission to go into all the world, to make disciples, teaching people everything that Jesus had taught and to baptise in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. We baptise in obedience to Jesus' command.

In the New Testament baptism is seen as being primarily for adults who had *accepted the Christian faith* (see Acts 2:37-41, Acts 8:26-33) but there were exceptions when a whole household were baptised (and we assume they included children) as in the case of Lydia (see Acts 16:11-15) and the jailer at Philippi (see Acts 16:25-33).

Baptism is a 'sacrament' : a visible sign of God's love. In baptism, we are thanking God for his gift of life and publicly acknowledging his love. We are acknowledging that we all need to turn away from the darkness of evil and to make a new start with God.

### Q. Is it about Death and Life ?

A. Baptism signifies a *dying* to an old world and being *born again* (see John 3:5-7, Acts 2:37-41). It signifies a dying with Christ in his death and rising with him in his resurrection (Romans 6:3-11).

Baptism is also seen as entry into the community of believers but ,as St. Paul makes clear, it is not a magical ritual but a sign of turning away from one lifestyle to adopt the way of the gospel.

The Greek word for repentance is *metanoia*, a turning round.

Baptism is an identity marker which not only confirms what God has been doing in a person's life but also helps to enable them to live up to their new found identity in Christ.

You are thinking about making a conscious choice to be baptised – it's not like getting a swimming certificate or a GCSE – it should mark the start of a life-long commitment to following Christ. This necessarily includes reading the Bible, praying and going to Church.

### **Q. What about the Holy Spirit ?**

A. John baptised with water but Jesus baptises with the Holy Spirit. However, the image is the same – of being immersed or plunged into the Spirit. Like a sponge that is immersed in water and becomes full, so when Jesus baptises people in the Spirit they are filled with the Spirit. Being filled with the Spirit is not a once off event for we are encouraged to keep on being filled with the Spirit. Receiving the Spirit and being baptised in water go hand in hand. It is the Spirit that guarantees our new life in Christ and it is the Spirit that gives us the power to live this 'risen life'.

### **Q. What's the early history of Baptism ?**

A. In Apostolic times, baptism took place immediately after conversion but later when Christians were under persecution they took baptism so seriously that candidates had to have a sponsor from the church who would *guarantee* the new convert's change in lifestyle and perseverance in the faith.

By the third century there was a 'catechumenate' and a book called the 'Apostolic Tradition of Hippolytus' mentions three years preparation ! In the first year each candidate would be taught about Communion. In year two they were given instruction about the spiritual life of a Christian and in year three they were taught the doctrines of the church. Finally, a few weeks before baptism, the candidates were presented to the bishop and routine 'exorcisms' took place (not implying that they were possessed but to free them of any evil influences). From Maundy Thursday they fasted and were baptised at the Easter Vigil. The Bishop performed the baptism, which took place as dawn broke on Easter Day, the congregation having been praying and reading the scriptures. The candidates were taken naked (!) into the pool and asked their belief and trust in Father, Son and Holy Spirit (with each affirmation they were dipped). They were then clothed in a white robe, which they wore for a week. Then the bishop laid hands on them (Confirmation).

Clearly the early church took baptism very seriously. Whilst we may not follow all the practices of the early church, baptism is – and remains – a serious matter indeed.

### **Q. How do I prepare for Baptism ?**

A. To this end we want to help adults in their preparation for their baptism or re-affirmation of baptism vows. Candidates should take some time out to study, read and pray as well as attend meetings with the Clergy and others. Some people also choose to do a Christian studies course before they are baptised. Others might do one afterwards. The important thing is to know what we are saying and doing and to want to give our lives to Christ and to follow him. Getting baptised for any other reason would be an abuse of the sacrament and a grave matter for one's conscience.

Baptism remains the 'sacrament of the initiation' incorporating us into the life of Christ and the life of the Church. It can only happen once. Communion, the other 'sacrament', is repeated (assuming we are Confirmed) every time we attend Church. But both work in a similar way – identifying the believer with Jesus and equipping them for their new life in Christ.

## **Q. What decisions do I have to make ?**

A. During the Mass at which you are baptised you will have to publicly make the following declarations :

Do you reject the devil and all rebellion against God ?

**I reject them.**

Do you renounce the deceit and corruption of evil ?

**I renounce them.**

Do you repent of the sins that separate us from God and neighbour ?

**I repent of them.**

Do you turn to Christ as Saviour ?

**I turn to Christ.**

Do you submit to Christ as Lord ?

**I submit to Christ.**

Do you come to Christ, the way, the truth and the life ?

**I come to Christ.**

These are serious matters – are you really ready to say them with conviction ?

If you are, the Christian community will promise to support you and pray for you.

## **Q. What happens during the service ?**

A. Unless you are also being Confirmed by the Bishop, your baptism will normally take place during the main Sunday Mass (at 10.30am). This is so that you can be seen to be joining the family of the Church and be welcomed into membership. In turn, the Church will promise to support and pray for you.

People will be on hand to make sure you know where to sit and when you need to move. Some parts of the service will be for the whole congregation to join, some will be for you and your sponsors.

For the baptism itself, you and your sponsors will be asked by the priest to gather around the font (the font is a large basin on a pedestal, at the back of the church)

## **Q. What do the symbols mean ?**

A. There are a number of important symbols which will be used during the service itself :

(a) *The sign of the cross* - the priest will make the sign of the cross on your forehead. This is like an invisible badge to show that Christians are united with Christ and must not be ashamed to stand up for their faith in him.

The priest says: 'Christ claims you for his own. Receive the sign of his cross. do not be ashamed to confess the faith of Christ crucified.'

(b) *Water* - the priest will pour water on your head. Water is a sign of washing and cleansing. In baptism it is a sign of being washed free from sin and beginning a new life with God.

Water is a sign of life, but also a symbol of death. When we are baptised our old life is buried in the waters (like drowning) and we are raised to *new life* with Christ.

(c) *Anointing* - after baptism in water, the priest will anoint you with oil. This is a sign of the outpouring of God's Holy Spirit.

The priest says: 'May God, who has received you by baptism into his Church, pour upon you the riches of his grace, that within the company of Christ's pilgrim people you may daily be renewed by his anointing Spirit, and come to the inheritance of the saints in glory.'

(d) *The welcome* - the church congregation will say some formal words of welcome to acknowledge that you have joined the Church and to show how pleased they are to have you among them.

(e) *Candles* - Jesus is called the light of the world. You will notice a large candle lit near the font (the Paschal, or Easter, candle – which represents the risen Christ) and you will be given a lighted candle at the end of the service as a reminder of the light which has come into your life. It is up to you to reject the world of darkness and follow a way of life that reflects goodness and light and shares this light with others.

### **Q. What is the role of sponsors ?**

A. Sponsors promise to pray and support you in the Christian faith. It is an *important* and *responsible* role. They should be baptised and practising Christians. Ideally, you should have two sponsors.

### **Q. What's the difference between a “baptism” and a “christening” ?**

A. None, they are just different words for the same thing.

### **Q. Can we have a private service of baptism ?**

A. No. Baptisms take place in the church's main service, because they are a public declaration that you have become part of the church family. It is important that the church congregation is there to support and welcome you.

### **Q. What is the right age for baptism ?**

A. Baptism can happen at any age. What matters is that those concerned believe it is right to ask for baptism. This is usually celebrated with Confirmation by the Bishop. You can only be baptised once, but there are ways of renewing your commitment publicly as an adult – The Vicar, Fr. Mark McAulay SSC, can advise you on this (020 8361 1946).