

BAPTISM

John the Baptist pointed away from himself to Jesus the Baptiser. The word 'baptise' comes from the Greek for 'to dip', 'to immerse', 'to plunge'. John plunged people into the water of the river Jordan; Jesus plunges us into the Living Water of the Holy Spirit, immersing us deep into the life of God.

It is in the sacrament of Baptism that the individual meets Jesus the Baptiser. The community of the Church is central to the meaning of Baptism. It is through being plunged into the Church that we are plunged by Jesus into his life with the Father in the Spirit.

Water is something rich in symbolism. We tend to take it for granted, but in the Middle East water is the great symbol of life, used for cleansing, refreshing, bringing life and growth. The priest or deacon pours water three times over the person's head, saying 'I baptise you in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.' Through this pouring, God pours out the cleansing, refreshing and life-giving water of his Spirit.

Baptism in the early Church was by total immersion, bringing out much more clearly the deepest meaning of the sacrament: not just being washed clean of sin, but being plunged deep into the life of the Trinity. Ideally, baptism should still be by immersion rather than pouring.

In Baptism, God overcomes the great gulf between us and him brought about by humanity from its first beginnings ('original sin'). He adopts us as his beloved sons and daughters, making us members of his family. Jesus tells us that we must be 'born again' of water and the Holy Spirit (John 3:3-8). We emerge new-born from the baptismal water to begin our new life with God. This may well come alive for us later in life, but it is at our Baptism that this new birth takes place.

Baptism involves 'dying and rising with Christ' (Romans 6:1-4). We die to sin, freed from all past sinfulness, and rise to share the joyful power of Easter.

By Baptism we are made living parts of the Body of Christ, the Church. We together are Christ's Church, a community intimately united with the living Jesus, and so sharing his royal dignity, his priestly office and his mission to the world. The Holy Spirit is poured into our hearts, uniting us to Jesus and to each other 'in him'. Baptism unites us visibly with every other baptized Christian, the foundation of our search for deeper unity together.

Baptism is the beginning of a life of pilgrimage. The Israelites escaped from slavery through the waters of the 'Red Sea'; the baptised person escapes from slavery to sin through the waters of Baptism, and begins a life-long journey to the Promised Land of eternal life with God. We need to say a deeper and deeper 'Yes' to all that our Baptism means, and live every moment of our lives 'baptised in the Spirit', plunged deep in the life of God.

Infant Baptism is common practice among Catholics. Being an infant does not make a child unable to receive love or to belong to a family, whether of his or her parents or of God. Jesus loved children and welcomed them, and there has been infant baptism in the Church since its earliest days. Sacraments are God's key visible way of continuing his saving work, and Baptism ensures the infant's salvation. The salvation of those unbaptised is left in the loving hands of our Father.