

## STUDIES OF RELIGION

A significant practice undertaken by all Christian adherents (except Salvation Army and Quakers) is the Sacrament of initiation, more popularly known as baptism. This practice, which involves water and the Spirit, marks the beginning of the candidate's journey as a member of the church, as a Christian and as a child of God. The following will assess how significant baptism is in the life of the adherent by looking at the symbols baptism conveys and what it means for the believer.

When a person is baptised, they are following a practice that is over 2000 years old. John the Baptist preached a baptism of conversion and Jesus himself was baptised by John in the Jordan River. Jesus also baptised and commissioned his disciples to do the same (Mt 28:19). So when a person is baptised they are continuing the practice that Jesus emphasised.

When Jesus emerged from the baptismal waters of the Jordan, a white dove rested upon him and he heard God's voice saying, 'This is my beloved son with whom I am well pleased' (Lk 3:22). Therefore a person who is baptised looks forward to receiving the gifts of the Holy Spirit as well as becoming a son/daughter of God.

The receiving of the Holy Spirit is crucial in the journey of a Christian. Remembering that Jesus' ministry commenced at his baptism, the Christian also embarks on a life long journey with Christ and so the guidance of the Holy Spirit becomes imperative. As Paul writes in Gal 5:22-23, 'The gifts of the Holy Spirit include; love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control.' These gifts enable a baptised Christian to live more fully as a child of God.

Paul, also argued the importance of the Sacrament of baptism. For Paul it was not a matter of following external Jewish rituals, but rather to be a Christian, an adherent had to believe in Christ as the Son of God and to publicly express that faith through the practice of baptism. Even to this day, baptism allows the adherent and the church community to publicly express their faith in God and can also be seen as a form of worship and praise.

Baptism today involves a number of symbolic steps. The person to be baptised is surrounded by a community of people professing the same faith including parents and godparents who will accompany the person on their life journey. During baptism the community gathers around the baptismal font, which is usually placed at the back of the Church, symbolising that one must first be baptised before they become a full member and can enter the church. The font is referred to as the Spiritual womb of the Church indicating the candidate is reborn through water and the Holy Spirit. As Jesus said to Nicodemus in John 3, the candidate in baptism undergoes spiritual rebirth. Responsibilities entail, as well as a sense of belonging and meaning. Thus like any initiation rite, baptism moves the person from being a child to becoming a child of God.

In the past, the font was usually shaped as a cross and the adherent would step down into the waters, be washed and emerge out of the waters symbolising the person dying to their old ways of living and rising to new life. Therefore, the font symbolises the spiritual womb of new life and the waters symbolise the tomb of Jesus.

In the Orthodox tradition, the priest breathes over the waters of the font to symbolise the presence of the Holy Spirit which hovered over the waters of Creation (Gen 1:1) again reminding the adherent that the baptism in the waters is a receiving of the Holy Spirit of God which will transform their lives. The candidate is then either immersed in the waters (Protestant and Orthodox) or the water is sprinkled on their foreheads (Maronite and Roman

Catholics and Anglican). This is thrice repeated as an action that reminds the baptised of their faith and belief in the Holy Trinity and the invitation to be in a loving relationship with the Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

Other symbols of the practice of baptism include the lighting of a candle to remind the individual and the church community that Jesus is present as the light of the world (Jn 8:12) and that the baptised are called to let their light shine (Mt 5:14). Baptism is a call to responsibility and discipleship, which is further evidenced when the Gospel is proclaimed by the priest or minister. In hearing the word of God, the adherent is guided in their Christian journey and called to spread the Good News of Christ.

Humans have a tendency to temptation and sin as seen in the story of Adam and Eve (Gen 3) and so baptism is a washing away of this original sin in order that the baptised has a new start to life and this is followed through with the dressing in the white garments. To strengthen the adherent they are chrismed with oil. Oil symbolises in the Hebrew Scriptures royalty and consecration and so all baptised are called to an important role in serving God. The oil also symbolises being prepared for the fight against the devil and oil serves a purpose of making the person slippery from the grasp of evil. Therefore, baptism is not only a time of grace through receiving the gifts of the Holy Spirit but also strengthens one to be a faithful follower of Christ.

Receiving a saint's name acknowledges the Church's belief that we are a community of saints and sinners, the living and departed and all pray for each other, intercede for one another and are guided by the role model of saints in the Christian journey.

During Jesus' time, baptism was reserved for adults but soon after entire families were baptised, including infants. Today, debate arises as to whether infant or adult baptism is better. Either way, baptism offers the candidate the gift of the Holy Spirit, makes members of the church and allows all to be a part of the body of Christ. Grace flows, meaning is given, belonging is sensed but so is responsibility and calling.

Overall the number of baptisms are falling in Western countries. Unfortunately, there are some baptised who have abandoned their faith or show little passion for their Christian journey. Even if they don't embrace their baptismal calling the seal of baptism is still there for their return.

In conclusion, Baptism gives public expression to deeply held convictions by the parents or adult candidate, about the purpose and value of human life. If one fully lives out their baptismal calling, it can be evidenced through their works of mercy and compassion, and by how much they fully reflect God's image and the gifts of the Holy Spirit in a world of contradictions.