

BAPTISM AND FONTS

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By baptism, Christians are immersed in the liberating death of Christ where their sins are buried, where the 'old Adam' is crucified with Christ, and where the power of sin is broken. Thus those baptised are no longer slaves to sin, but free. Fully identified with the Christ, they are buried with him and are raised here and now to a new life in the power of the Resurrection of Jesus Christ, confident that they will also ultimately be one with him in a resurrection like his.¹

This clear and confident statement of the central significance of Baptism will serve to introduce the reason why the design and position of baptismal fonts has become a matter of importance in the life of the church: we are no longer concerned exclusively with the christening of infants at a socially convenient hour, but with the baptism of new christians of any age, many of whom desire a more significant and demonstrative rite than has been traditionally available in the Church of England. In addition there is the question of what the celebration of public baptism says to those others who are present about our participation in the saving work of Christ. This is the force of Canon B 21, which states:

It is desirable that every minister having a cure of souls shall normally administer the sacrament of Holy Baptism on Sundays at public worship when the most number of people come together, that the congregation there present may witness the receiving of them that be newly baptised into Christ's Church, and be put in remembrance of their own profession made to God in their baptism.

METHODS OF BAPTISM

Baptism has been practised in a number of different ways in the history of the Church and in spite of St. Paul's insistence that baptism is one (1 Corinthians 1.10-17), churches and denominations have played off one means against another. In historical order they are

a) **Immersion**

From the available evidence, and from the remains of early fonts which survive, it seems clear that in spite of the symbolism of drowning (dying with Christ), baptisms in the first four centuries or so were normally administered by immersion, rather than submersion. In other words, the candidates stood or knelt in the water up to their waist, and water was then poured over them. The power of the symbol derived not from being submerged or pushed under the water, but rather from going down into the water and rising up out of it. Early representations of the Baptism of our Lord, or of saints, (for example the mosaics at Ravenna or the gold altar front at San Ambrogio in Milan) do not represent fronts as being deeper than waist height.

b) **Affusion**

Affusion came into being when infant, rather than adult, baptism became the norm in established Christendom. Although mediaeval fonts, especially the

1. *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry* (The Lima Text), (Geneva, World Council of Churches, 1982).

earlier ones, are normally large enough to immerse infants, if not submerge them, few fonts are large enough to allow of the immersion of adult candidates. And did the climate have anything to do with a change of practice as the Christian faith moved north? In Milan, in the Ambrosian rite, baptism is by immersion to this day.

c) **Submersion**

Churches and sects which broke away at the time of the Reformation and later, such as the Anabaptists and the Brethren, returned to what they believed from the biblical accounts were primitive forms, and this literalism demanded submersion, rather than affusion or immersion.

d) **Sprinkling**

By the 18th century it is clear from the size of fonts, many of which are no bigger than the holy water stoups of the churches of Italy, as well as from literary references, that the sprinkling of a few drops of water was considered sufficient. This is a tradition continued by the supply of so-called 'portable fonts', which range in size from a salad-bowl to a complete miniature mediaeval font in plaster of paris with a bowl no bigger than an ashtray.

In spite of these developments, provision for baptism by immersion has been part of anglican practice, and a number of dioceses have churches with baptistries where immersion is possible – a classic example being in the (now disused) Church of St. Mary at Lambeth. Most are found in regions where the Baptists were strong, and were probably introduced in order to provide an alternative option in the established church.²

THE RECOVERY OF SYMBOLISM

Behind the desire to practise baptism by immersion – usually a request made by adult candidates in search of a powerful experience – lies the recovery of baptism as a dying and rising with Christ. 'Do you not know that all of us who have been baptised into Christ Jesus were baptised into His death?' (Romans 6.3). Dying and rising, the putting off of the old life and being clothed with the new, is the heart of the baptismal action.

Second, the baptismal waters have more to do with the regeneration of life (Genesis 1.3) than the washing away of the stain of sin. The water which is the agent of drowning and death is also the water over which the Holy Spirit hovers to bring a new creation to birth. The waters of the womb are parted, the candidate emerges through them to a new birth as the children of Israel went through the waters of the Red Sea as they escaped from slavery in Egypt and made for freedom in the Promised Land. Even in these waters, God will not forsake them: 'Fear not, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are mine. When you pass through the waters I will be with you; and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you.' (Isaiah 43.1-2).

More attention has been paid in recent years to the symbolism of death and resurrection, than to the symbolism of passing through the waters to a new life; and little thought has been given to certain key subsidiary images in the New Testament, like clothing, anointing and the giving of a light.

2. See G. K. Brandwood, 'Immersion Baptistries in Anglican Churches, in *The Archaeological Journal*, 147 (1990) pp 420-436

Although there may be a natural desire to return to the pre-fall paradisaical state of 'naked but not ashamed' (Genesis 2.25), today's enthusiasm for *public* baptism contrasts sharply with the self-contained baptistries in early churches, and the division into male and female candidates – and indeed, male and female deacons who accompany them down into the water. In this context, the Pauline language of putting off the old and being clothed with the new (Col. 3.9-14, Eph. 4. 22-24) and its accompanying baptismal rite of being clothed with the new white christening robe – becoming one of the *candidati* – carries a lot of meaning for those who are beginning to grow into what they have just put on.

In the revised rites, marking the candidate with the sign of the cross, the symbol of a victory won through suffering, takes place after the Renunciation and before the water baptism. This happens at the beginning of the rite, and such a preliminary anointing with oil has parallels with the anointing with which an athlete makes his muscles supple as he prepares for the contest ahead. After emerging from the waters, the candidate may be sealed by the Bishop with the perfumed oil of Chrism as a sign of his incorporation into the royal priesthood of Christ. Retained in the necessarily conservative Coronation rite, anointing with Chrism has its origin in the Old Testament practice of anointing Priests (Lev. 21.10 and Kings 1 Sam 16.13), and is echoed in the synoptic accounts of the Baptism of Jesus, as he is proclaimed by the heavenly voice to be the Christ, the anointed one. Judging by the bath oils which are now available for both men and women, there should be little surprise occasioned by the widespread use of the baptismal oils!

Enlightenment – being empowered by the God who calls us out of darkness into his own marvellous light – is a recurring image of the growth in understanding which accompanied the mystagogic instruction of the candidates in the early centuries. Receiving a sign of light, a candle lit from the Paschal Candle at the Easter Vigil, is a sign that the candidate has passed from darkness to light and a reminder that they are to shine as lights in the world.

But however powerful the symbols of anointing, clothing and light may be, they are clearly secondary to the primary symbolism of water, where the waters are not an inert mass so much as a wall, a barrier, a gateway to be passed through, a womb, from whose darkness new life emerges, a well-spring which promises a new creation.

THE HISTORY OF LITURGICAL DEVELOPMENT

The paschal emphasis is at the heart of the theology and practice of christian baptism, and has been so since New Testament times. By the third century, Easter had become the significant time for the celebration of Baptism, and indeed Lent and Eastertide had been shaped liturgically largely in response to pre- and post-baptismal catechesis.³ It was this paschal emphasis which the architects of liturgical reform in the 1950's and 1960's sought to draw to the surface. To be baptised was to die and rise with Christ, and Romans 6.3-11 – the key reading for a celebration of Baptism at the Easter Vigil – made clear not only the once and for all nature of Baptism as the intelligent response of the believing adult to what God had done for him or her in Christ, but also linked the moment of

3. See, for example, Maxwell Johnson, 'From Three Days to Forty: Baptismal Preparation and the Origins of Lent'. *Studia Liturgica* 20 (1990), pp. 185-200.

conversion, of becoming a Christian, with the celebration of Christ's dying and rising in the dramatic, once-for-all symbol of drowning, a dying to sin in order to live to righteousness. Such a view has tended to view baptism as an *anamnesis*, a 'remembrance', of Christ's death and resurrection.

But in addition to Eastertide, the Church developed another baptismal season, and a complementary baptismal model. Baptism also marks God's anointing of his chosen at the start of their discipleship, when the seeds of the new creation are sown. The outpouring of the spirit on Jesus at his baptism in the Jordan (Mark 1.10), and the new birth by water and the Spirit (John 3.5) are key elements in the baptismal tradition, particularly of the eastern church. This tradition has its liturgical focus in the celebration of the Epiphany, where Jesus is revealed to all the world in the waters of baptism as the Christ, the light of the Gentiles. This pattern says more about God's act in his new creation, and hints at a theology of baptism which allows for gradual growth towards maturity rather than a sudden moment of startling conviction. It takes seriously Jesus' own baptismal anointing as the point at which a new and different quality of relationship with the Father emerged – a relationship that was not sealed till the moment of final surrender on the cross. Such a view tends to see Baptism as an *epiclesis*, an 'invocation', of God's promises in the future.

For baptism to give expression to these two complementary theologies, the waters of baptism must be understood both as the dark waters of death and also as the waters of a new birth. The baptismal font must be both tomb and womb.

RECONCILING THE MODELS: THE NEW FONT IN PORTSMOUTH

The new font in the Cathedral at Portsmouth makes these points. Carved out of Purbeck stone, rich in fossils, it is based on a 9th century Greek font standing in Sandringham churchyard. The solid tomblike quality, combined with its cruciform shape, make a clear statement of our going down into the deep waters of death in order that we may be raised to new life in Christ. At the same time, because it is placed under the central tower, between the newly completed atrium-like Nave and the old parish church which forms the Choir of the cathedral, it makes a powerful statement at the heart of the building about a new beginning as you enter the church proper. In addition to its use for baptism by immersion or affusion, it provides a place where a coffin can rest the night before the funeral thus establishing the link between our dying and rising in Christ at Baptism, and our entry through death into the nearer presence of God. With these vivid associations it provides a striking reminder of their baptismal faith to anyone who moves from one part of the cathedral to the other.

The inscription round the rim from the Mystagogical Catecheses of Cyril of Jerusalem reinforces this. It reads:

When you went down into the water,
it was like night and you could see nothing;
but when you came up again, it was like finding yourself in the day.
That one moment was your death and your birth:
that saving water was both your grave and your mother.⁴

As fewer children are brought to baptism in infancy, a greater proportion of those who come to what Archbishop Michael Ramsey called 'conscious and intelligent faith' in teenage or adulthood are unbaptised. In this Font it is possible to baptise infants, toddlers, teenagers and adults with equal ease, and with varying degrees of immersion.

4. Cyril of Jerusalem, *Mystagogical Catecheses*, II.4 in *St. Cyril of Jerusalem's Lectures on the Christian Sacraments*, ed F. L. Cross, (London, S.P.C.K., 1951), p 19.

SHIFTS IN TWENTIETH CENTURY BAPTISMAL THEOLOGY AND ECCLESIOLOGY

This change in the inherited anglican pattern has brought new pressures to bear on the tradition of infant baptism, and also on the unconscious way in which the balance between differing theologies of the church is subtly altered. While Anglicanism has always believed in the rightness of infant baptism as a sign of God's prevenient grace, freely bestowed, such infants are not baptised solely on the ticket of their believing parents and sponsors by extension with the household baptisms of the first few centuries. In baptism a work of grace begins to be articulated, which it is the church's task to nurture and make visible. However, the baptismal theology of the 1960's which found its way into the Initiation Rites of the Alternative Service Book 1980 leans almost exclusively on the paschal model, reflecting the Roman Catholic reform of the Holy Week rites in the 1950's which stripped from the prayer for the blessing of the water at the restored Easter Vigil all references to the acts of God in creation and the new creation.⁵ Little wonder then that the 1980 Initiation Rites have been interpreted as a tool for dividing 'true believers' – as they seem to the eyes of the incumbent or local church – from the rest, and that we have witnessed movements not only for the reform, but also for the abolition of infant baptism.

But it is not only a matter of holding to the priority of the divine action. Different theologies of initiation sharpen the question of church membership, and here is the point at which different ecclesiological presuppositions surface most clearly. Is the Church *ecclesia contra mundum*, a body called out of the world to witness to a distinct and separate life? Is it the ark, outside which is no salvation, floating on the stormy seas of the wicked world, rescuing people by hauling them aboard? Is the model for the Church's life a monastic/desert model of withdrawal from the social and political realities of current confusions in order to point to a more excellent way, and prepare for a kingdom not of this world? Part of the tradition says 'Yes' to this, and the church of the elect, the self-consciously saved, knows what the rules for membership are, where the boundaries are, and can celebrate the moment when converts step over these boundaries with great clarity. It makes for a tidy definition of conscious membership, which appeals to those who want to speak of baptism primarily in terms of human response rather than divine initiative. Whether consciously or not, the favourite ecclesial image of the Alternative Service Book – 'We are the body of Christ' – emphasises the gathered club membership of the church in a way that has undoubtedly confirmed and strengthened the regular eucharistic community, but has not made it particularly easy for those who are feeling their way towards faith, who might be helped by the less self-confident sounding model of 'fellow-disciples on the way together'.

But the idealised 1960's model must not be allowed to sweep the board. Not everyone in England in the 1990s will fit neatly into the idealised world of the 4th century, and adult baptisms, though increasing significantly, are not yet the norm. Pastorally, not everyone who responds to the call to 'put on Christ' is ready for this liturgical straitjacket. Anyway, whatever the pundits say, that is not most people's actual experience. For many people childhood initiation, probably through infant baptism (and quite possibly teenage confirmation), is followed by

5. See Dominic E. Serra, 'The Blessing of Baptismal Water at the Paschal Vigil', in *Worship* 64.1 (1990), pp. 142-156.

a period of lapsing or merely routine observance from which there is an awakening or renewal, and the need to celebrate coming to full faith, with the not-infrequent demand for 're-baptism' – for a more significant and memorable act than that sprinkling of an infant from a bird-birth or even ash-tray font which goes by the popular name of christening.

Behind this longing for a more dramatic and significant rite lies the genuine desire to express in the moment of initiation something of our union with the death and resurrection of Christ. For those who have come to full faith after a period of darkness, this, and not an unremembered infant christening, is the moment when the language of St. Paul in Romans 6.3-11, which speaks of being buried with Christ by baptism into death, seems most real.

This feeling is powerfully reinforced by the texts in the ASB, which concentrate almost exclusively on the paschal character of baptism, on the link in baptism between the death and resurrection of Christ and the dying and rising of the believer as he goes down into the deep waters of death. But where in the ASB rites is any weight given to that complementary theology of baptism which balances the *anamnesis* of Christ's death and resurrection with a strong emphasis on the new birth by water and the *epiclesis* of the spirit? Where is there a mention of the pattern of Jesus' own baptism as the inauguration of his conscious sonship as being what is offered in the rite? There is precious little on the new creation, on baptism as an *epiclesis* of the spirit, let alone the proper balancing of Easter by Epiphany.

A baptism rite, or at least a baptismal prayer over the water, that has some reference to this tradition⁶ might do a lot to free the celebration of baptism in the ASB from its strait-jacket, and by reintroducing rebirth as a key concept, help to keep a valuable insight in the historic anglican tradition of infant baptism in play. Inevitably, a baptismal practice that has centred almost exclusively on the Romans 6 model encourages a 'moment' theology, a sharp line between death and resurrection, between pre- and post- conversion, between before and after baptism. That kind of baptismal theology makes for a church that is very hard at the edges and in which the concept of gradual coming to faith is more difficult to embrace. At the least, we need the possibility of phasing the baptism rite into stages, so that even if the paschal model predominates, the rite can be understood as celebrating a gradual journey as well as a cataclysmic moment of change. A renunciation of evil and turning to Christ at the start of Lent, marked by the signing with the cross would be followed by baptism into the death and resurrection of Christ at Easter, and the anointing with prayer for the gift of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost.

Integral to such 'staged rites' is a sense of the powerful and pervasive presence of the Spirit in awakening repentance and turning before baptism as much as in baptism itself, and in the confirmation and empowering for ministry which may follow. It is this theological perception, that baptism is our personal Pentecost in fulfilment of Joel's prophecy (2.28-29), that has united with liturgical scholarship to make it well nigh impossible to continue to hold that confirmation adds some special ingredient to what was given in water baptism, or to see baptism as no more than entry into the dying and rising of Christ, which confirmation completes in the outpouring of the Spirit, much as Pentecost in Luke/Acts completes Easter.

6. See, for example, the prayers over the water in the Service for The Feast of the Baptism of the Lord in *The Promise of his Glory* (Church House Publishing, 1990), pp 187-188, 199 & 207.

As the church evolves a 'process' model to complement the 'moment' model in celebrating sacramental acts, we need to recover a broader understanding of the theology of baptism. This must include elements associated with the baptism of Christ: not only anointing with the Holy Spirit, but also the inauguration of the new creation, and entry into the life of the Trinity.

A second element must be those ideas associated with Pentecost: our incorporation into a people set free by the Holy Spirit, who recognise the gifts we have received, and act apostolically to offer unity through diversity.

In all this we must affirm the status and dignity of the baptised, as members of the royal priesthood with responsibility for the created order. In this context, baptism is a preparation for and commitment to ministry, a conscious embodiment of the values of the coming kingdom made visible in a life of suffering shot through with glory.

MINISTERING THE SACRAMENT

In theory, the chief minister of baptism is the Bishop, however much in practice it is delegated to a priest, and there is a requirement (Canon B 24.2) that the Bishop be informed in the case of every adult baptism. In the case of adults it is clearly implied that baptism and confirmation are not to be separated, and although the Bishop may delegate parts of the service to others, eg. the Signing of the Cross, the Giving of a Light, and even the Water Baptism, he presides over the whole rite.

It is important, therefore, that the administration of baptism shall not be so fragmented by different *styles* of baptism that candidates can say 'I belong to Apollos', or 'I belong to Cephas': there must be a recognisable unity between the rites in any one Diocese. While the person of the Bishop may be sufficient to guarantee the underlying unity expressed in a variety of different modes, the problem becomes more acute when different styles are practised in any one church: it is not uncommon for an adult in the enthusiasm of a newly-awakened faith to ask if he can be baptised *properly* now, by which he means by immersion – or rather submersion.

If there is a desire to make provision for baptism by immersion or even by submersion, then it is important that the same baptismal font is used for adults and infants alike. It is equally important that this, which is *the* font, is a permanent and visible feature of the Church, witnessing to that important and dominical sacrament and not being covered over or hidden away when not in use.⁷ As baptism is an initiation, no person can be baptised a second time: but with the possibility of baptism being administered in a diversity of ways, it is all the more important to make it clear that baptism is unitive – something all Christians have in common; with different modes of baptism exercised within one church, the sacrament could easily become divisive.

THE NATURE AND POSITIONING OF THE FONT

That is the reason why I believe that there should be one font in or at which all baptisms can be celebrated.⁸ It must be functionally useful: it must hold sufficient water, and the water must be so placed that the minister who is

7. See *The Provision of Fonts*, 2.1; an annex to General Synod paper HB(92)36.

8. See *The Provision of Fonts*, 2.3.1-3 *supra*.

officiating can reach it. It must have sufficient depth and space for adult and infant candidates to be baptised in it or by it. That there should only be one font in a church is a point upheld by Chancellor Blackett-Ord Q.C. in *Re St. Nicholas Gosforth (1988)*, unreported, sitting in the Newcastle Consistory Court, who said of the possibility that there should be two fonts: 'I think it is clear that this could not be authorised. There can only be one font, just as there is one baptism.'

However, two recent judgments have not upheld this principle. In *Re St. Barnabas, Kensington (1990)*, 1 All ER 169, Chancellor Newsom Q.C., sitting in the London Consistory Court, granted a confirmatory Faculty for a tank font for the baptism of adults in addition to the existing font for the baptism of infants, in spite of Canon F1 which refers to 'font' in the singular. Among his reasons, he cited Canon F2, which is similar to Canon F1 in wording, and refers to 'Holy Table' in the singular, pointing out that there was plenty of authority for more than one Holy Table in a church and that 'there is not at the present date any rule of law that there may be only one font in a Church. . . '.

The Commissary General of Canterbury, Judge Newey, Q.C. in *Re St. George's, Deal (1990)*, unreported, affirmed that the font 'should serve as a symbol of Christian initiation, that a font should be in a prominent position. . . ' and that it 'should be conspicuous to anyone entering the Church'. But he agreed with Chancellor Newsom that there might be more than one font, and so granted a Faculty for a tank font on condition that it was kept covered when not in use, saying that 'for more than one font to be on view in the Church would be likely to detract from the symbolic value of one'. Faced with two irreconcilable judgments, Judge Newey seems to have been persuaded on largely practical grounds: 'In practice I think it would be extremely difficult to design a font which would be equally satisfactory for baptism of infants or adults by affusion and for baptism of adults by immersion or submersion'.

By contrast, I want to uphold the principle of one font. I cannot agree with Chancellor Newsom's analogy with the multiplicity of altars. A Christian can receive Holy Communion any number of times in widely differing contexts as opposed to a universal conviction of one baptism, once. Besides that, there is a well established liturgical principle of no more than one altar in any one space. I also – from my experience of the new font at Portsmouth – wish to stress that a single font in which baptism can be administered in a variety of ways is not only practicable; it makes an important statement of the significance of baptism for people of all ages and sizes which a conventional font cannot.

What the font says by its style, size and position tells the regular worshipper and casual visitor alike a good deal about the life of the church, the company of the baptised. As is suitable for a place where the individual affirms his faith in God and consciously starts to share God's life, the font needs to be set in a space scaled to the individual. This is in contrast to the altar which is the place where we who are many are made one in Christ. The font's position in relation to the altar, in relation to the entrance or narthex of the church, and in relation to the place where the Gospel is proclaimed is of great importance: the font contains the waters we pass through as we move from death to life; they are not the end of the journey, but the gateway which leads from the old life to the new. The size, shape and positioning of the font can express this in a way which will, I hope, lead the Church to recover a crucial element in its ministry and mission.