

Baptisms at St Mary's, Willesden

We are always delighted to baptise both infants and those old enough to answer for themselves. Baptism is the entry into the Christian life, marking a sincere commitment to follow Jesus Christ. Infants, who cannot answer for themselves, are baptised on the basis of the parents' and godparents' commitment, both as disciples of Christ themselves, and to the upbringing of the child as a Christian.

Baptism? I wanted my baby christened!

Christening and baptism happen in the same service. We "christen" sea vessels, using champagne instead of water, whereby the vessel is named and launched. When people are baptised, they are also given a Christian name (i.e. christened): in the eyes of the Church you don't have a Christian name (only a forename) unless it is conferred on you sacramentally in baptism, confirmation or ordination. As these three sacraments use a special oil called chrism, you can see an additional link with the word "christen". At its most basic, "to christen" means "to make someone a Christian", which happens through the sacrament of baptism.

What is baptism?

Jesus commanded His followers to go out into the whole world and preach the gospel, making disciples of every race and background, and baptising these new believers (Matthew 28:19). Baptism one of the seven sacraments, which the Book of Common Prayer defines as "an outward and visible sign of an inward and visible grace." A sacrament is a ceremony in which the physical and spiritual, the earthly and the heavenly meet: God works through the physical actions of ministers of His Church. In baptism, the outward sign is the pouring of water on (or the immersing in water of) the new believer in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. The person coming to baptism is called the candidate (from a word that means "white", signifying purity of intention).

Water

Water is essential to life. It is in everything we eat and drink; it is used in washing. It is the main element in baptism as a sign of cleansing, of the washing away of sin. Although infants have not had much chance to commit sins, they are born into a sinful, flawed race: we only need to turn on the news to know that. After physical birth, God offers them a fresh start, a new, spiritual birth, through baptism. When the deacon or priest pours the holy water on the candidates, God the Holy Spirit Himself comes upon them, cleaning them up spiritually and making them God's children.

In a life-or-death emergency, anyone can baptise: simply pour water on the candidate and say, "I baptise you in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen." This is a perfectly valid baptism. In all other circumstances, we make an occasion of it, using additional signs.

History

The first Christians were all Jews: they had been brought up with the Bible and with belief in God. They needed very little preparation before being baptised.

As time went on, non-Jews (known as Gentiles) wanted to become Christians. Because they had been worshipping the many gods of the nations they belonged to, and had no background in the Bible, they had a period of preparation, usually up to a year; during this time, they were known as catechumens. When they made the decision to begin this journey they were anointed with the oil of catechumens. They learned the "catechism": basics of Christian teaching; they were taught the Bible and learned prayers and a summary of the Faith called the Creed.

At the end of their preparation, they were examined – tested to see if they answered in faith. They could then be baptised: in those days they were immersed in water. Men and women were baptised separately because, as a sign they were giving up everything of their old life, they went into the water naked. Immersion meant they symbolically died and were buried with Christ; emerging from the water showed they had risen with Christ to eternal life. They were given a new name (a Christian name: in English law to this day Christian names have legal status). They were clothed in a white garment to show their new purity (this is the origin of Christening robes). They were then anointed with perfumed oil called Chrism: The Queen was anointed with scented oil before she could be crowned;

the newly-baptised are anointed to show they are part of the family of God, the Royal Priesthood. Finally, the newly-baptised are given a candle that is lit from the Paschal Candle – a special big candle blessed at Easter, symbolising the Risen Lord – to show that the Christian light has been passed to a new generation.

Today

These same rites are used today:

- The candidates make the Decision.
- They are anointed with oil of catechumens (also called oil of baptism), with which the sign of the Cross is marked on their foreheads.
- They profess their faith.
- They are baptised, at which they are given a Christian name or names. The priest will use a shell, which was the mediaeval pilgrims' badge; all Christians are on a life-time's pilgrimage to the heavenly city.
- They are anointed with the Oil of Chrism, which is poured on the crown of the head, making them members of the Royal Family of heaven.
- They may be clothed in a white garment; usually the vicar simply refers to it because they are already wearing it.
- They receive a candle, lit from the Paschal Candle.
- They are commissioned as officers in Christ's army.
- They are welcomed by the Christian congregation.

Godparents

As infants cannot answer for themselves, others do so for them. As well as the parents, this includes godparents. The Church of England is governed by the law of the land, which specifies that godparents must themselves be baptised and confirmed Christians. The vicar can use his discretion to set aside the need for confirmation, but not the requirement for baptism. As parents, when you are choosing godparents, you must make sure they have at least been baptised, and that they will take responsibility for your child's upbringing in the Christian faith, making an example of Christian commitment and life.

By law, boys must have two godfathers and one godmother. Girls must have two godmothers and one godfather. They must be present at the baptism (proxy is not allowed) so they can make the commitments.

Sponsors

Candidates who can answer for themselves do not need godparents, of course. Instead they should have two baptised Christians as sponsors who are present at the baptism. Although sponsors have no formal role in the ceremony, they are showing their support.

Preparation

The vicar must be satisfied that the parents are instructed and prepared for the Sacrament of Baptism: he will, therefore, make suitable arrangements with you. You will be given advice and materials to assist you with praying with and teaching the faith to your children.

Christian names

Usually candidates are baptised with their forenames (those on the birth certificate), which then become Christian names. They can, however, ask for additional or different names from those on the birth certificate; these are recognised by law, and you can ask the vicar for a formal certificate as official proof. If it's within 12 months of birth, you take this to the local register office who will add this to the entry of your child's birth, and it replaces the original forename(s) recorded when you first registered the birth.

Date and Time

Baptisms cannot take place in private, except in dire emergencies. The usual practice is for the baptism to take place during the 10:30 am Sunday Mass, as this means the newly baptised can be welcomed into the “parish family” of the church in which it is hoped they will grow. Candidates, parents and godparents *must* be in their places at least 15 minutes before the service to give the vicar time to issue final instructions. We do not delay the service for late arrivals, so it is essential that candidates, parents and godparents allow sufficient travelling time. You will need to agree a mutually convenient date and time with the vicar. Be aware that, because the Church of England is “the Church as by law established”, all our church services are open to the public.

Legal Matters

You have a right to request a child’s baptism in your parish church. If you live out of parish, you will need to ask the vicar to seek the goodwill of the vicar of your home parish.

There is no charge for a baptism. People do, however, usually like to make a donation, which you can do on the day or by arrangement.

If a non-adult candidate’s parents are separated, both parents must still agree formally to the baptism, unless a court of law has removed parental rights from the absent parent. Should you be in this situation, it is important that you inform the vicar at the time when you first request the baptism.

The vicar can make you an official, certified copy of the entry in the baptism register; there is a nationally-set charge for this. People only usually need this for legal proof of baptism. There is a different form for change of name.

How to Apply

Send an email via the Contact section of the [website](#). Remember, when asking people to be godparents, you must establish that they have, as a minimum, been baptised – and confirmed, preferably.

Further Information

There is a lot of helpful information on this website:

[The Church of England | Christenings \(churchofenglandchristenings.org\)](http://www.churchofenglandchristenings.org)

The Revd. Father Christopher P Phillips SSC, *Vicar of St Mary’s*

(Adapted from an original text by Fr. N. D. Bryson with permission, 2021)