

Prince George's baptism (christening) – what's it all about?

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By: the Archbishop of Canterbury, Archbishop Justin Welby

Into: the Church of England (Christian church)

What is baptism?

Baptism, which is sometimes called a 'christening' is a rite in which a person is formally admitted to the Christian church. In some Christian churches new Christians are baptised as babies. In other Christian churches, baptism is only given to people who are adult enough to understand what is being asked of them and able to decide for themselves if they want to become Christians and become part of the Church.

Where does it come from?

This 'rite of initiation' called baptism comes from the Bible. In three of the four books of the New Testament which describe the life of Jesus (the gospels), Matthew, Mark, and Luke, there is an account of how Jesus himself came to be baptised in the river Jordan by a man called John. The gospels tell us that John the Baptist was calling to people to turn from evil ways and to turn back to God and that in order to mark this repentance, people came to him at the river and had their evil behaviour (their sins) symbolically washed away by the water so that they were now physically and spiritually clean. The idea was that by doing this, they were publicly acknowledging their desire to focus on God from now on. Some of those people thought John was the specially chosen one of God, but John told them he was only a messenger. The chosen one of God was shortly to arrive. By this he meant Jesus Christ.

If you have a Bible, you can read about it in Matthew Chapter 3, verses 11-16; Luke Chapter 3, verse 21; Mark, Chapter 1, verses 1-9.



The Baptism of Christ by Verrochio

So John was astonished when Jesus came to him for baptism. Although John said it should really be Jesus baptising him, Jesus insisted that he too wanted to go through the rite of baptism. The gospels also say that when he went into and then came up out of the water, God spoke and was heard naming Jesus as his Son. By being baptised himself, Jesus showed that his focus was now to be wholly on what God wants for the world and this began his public ministry of preaching, teaching and healing. Because Jesus did this, his followers and then the early Church also baptised people who wanted to follow Jesus and this remains a foundational ritual (a sacrament) for most Christians today.

What happens?

Words

Baptism is composed of words, symbols and actions. The person to be baptised or the parents and godparents of a child make a statement of belief in the teachings of the Christian Church and also important promises to help the child in his or her Christian journey. In the case of a baby it is hoped that the parents and godparents will accompany the child in the practice of the Christian faith, taking him or her to services and other events in church, supporting the child's own spiritual journey, answering questions, and exploring together what Christianity tells us about Jesus. When the child is old enough, he or she can be confirmed (Confirmation) in another important church service where people make the baptism promises for themselves.

You can read the words used at Prince George's christening in the resource link at <http://www.churchofengland.org/weddings-baptisms-funerals/baptism.aspx>

Symbols

The important symbols of baptism include water, which in many churches is blessed by the minister and carefully poured on the head of the child. In some churches, the child or the adult is briefly but completely immersed in water, because this may come closer to Jesus' actual experience and also symbolises the whole person giving themselves to God. The water is either contained in a stone basin called a font, or in a specially designed pool.

In some churches the newly baptised person is clothed in a white garment or the baby is wrapped up in a white shawl to show that they are washed spiritually clean and have a new life as a Christian. Many babies wear a special white 'christening gown' in any case and sometimes that has been handed down in the family and been worn by successive generations. Prince George's christening gown is a replica of one that has been used for 60 royal babies but is now too fragile to wear.

In addition to water, a baptised person is also anointed with a special oil (chrism). The oil is put on the forehead of the baptised person by the minister who makes a sign of the cross with it. In the Church of England the oil is blessed on Maundy Thursday (the Thursday before Easter) by a bishop at a special service. The oil is then distributed to the priests who use it in baptisms. The oil signifies a blessing to strengthen the person in their new Christian life.

Another important symbol is the giving of a light, usually in the form of a candle which is often lit from a big candle in the church which is itself lit in a special service at Easter to symbolise Jesus' rising from the dead. That light of hope and belief in Jesus' resurrection is given to the baptised person (or parents and godparents) to show that the person is now a Christian who has joined their life to Jesus Christ.



Easter candle

Actions:

The priest or minister pours the water or immerses the person in water, makes the sign of the cross on the person's forehead and gives the light to the person or the parents and godparents. In this sense, the priest is like John the Baptist, guiding the person from their old life to a new life as a Christian and conveying God's blessing to them. That last part is very important – it's not just that Jesus was baptised but that God was understood to have blessed him by calling him his 'beloved Son'. That message of love and acceptance is also bestowed on every baptised person. That is why it is also important that the priest or minister announces the baptised person's name to everyone there, speaking directly to the baptised person. It is a way of saying God knows you, God loves you and God is glad that you are here.

What else to expect:

If the baptism takes place in church during a regular service, there will also be hymns and readings as well as the service itself. The baptism party is typically invited to the font during the service for the baptism to take place in front of the congregation. The congregation is the Christian family who will welcome the baptised child or adult into the Christian church and many will greet the newly baptised with applause.

What is a godparent?

A godparent is a person (or persons) chosen by the parents or family of a child to make the baptism promises on the child's behalf. The promises are statements of belief in Christian teaching and a promise to help bring up the child as a Christian. They are asked to support the child as he or she grows up exploring faith. That is why it is usually a requirement for godparents to be baptised adult Christians themselves, since they have to be able to make those promises faithfully and be able to support the child as he or she grows up and starts to ask questions about who they are and why they are here. A person of another faith or a person who is not baptised can still be an important person in the child's life and stand with the family at the baptism, but they may be called 'sponsors' rather than godparents.

What happens then?

After the baptism, the priest makes out a certificate which is a copy of the entry in the church's baptism register which is kept as a permanent record. The baptism certificate is an important document which needs to be kept because it is needed if a child goes on to be confirmed. It is also helpful to have it if applying for a place at a Christian school or if the person wants to get married in a Christian church. The certificate lists the child's name, the date and place of the baptism and also usually names the parents and godparents and the person who performed the baptism.

Other questions

Q. I have never been to church although I was baptised as a baby. Do I have to be re-baptised? Do I have to be re-baptised if I start going to another church?

A. No. Baptism in a recognised Christian denomination does not need to be repeated, but if you want to play an active part in a church or Christian community you may wish to be confirmed.

Q. What happens if you die and you have never been baptised? My parents left me to choose but I've never bothered, – does it matter?

A. That question has been debated by theologians down the centuries. But many theologians today believe that because God loves every human person God would never reject anyone who genuinely wants to accept him or who never had the chance to be baptised. On the other hand, baptism is a powerful and meaningful sign of positively choosing to follow Jesus' example, as well as an expression of the love parents have for their child.

Q. Isn't it just an excuse for a party?

A. Lots of people do have christening parties to celebrate afterwards, but that's not the point of a baptism. Baptism is a sacred event with promises made before God. It isn't something to be done for the sake of it or to be taken lightly.

Q. Suppose I want to mark the birth of a child but I don't want to have a baptism?

A. In some churches, including the Church of England, you can have a Thanksgiving service to mark the birth of a child.

Q. How much does it cost?

A. In the Church of England, baptism is free. There may be a charge for extra things to do with the service or for a copy of the certificate, but there is no charge for the baptism itself.

There are more FAQs about baptism on the Church of England website

<http://www.churchofengland.org/weddings-baptisms-funerals/baptism/christening-faqs.aspx>