

## **Baptism** (12 October 2003, at the baptism of Helen Ruth Schünemann)

Well, today we have a much looked-forward-to baptism. And the idea of baptism, that it washes away people's sins and gives them new life, goes back far into Jewish history and the Old Testament. We do it, to mark the moment that someone officially becomes a Christian, for two reasons: because John the Baptist baptized Jesus in the river Jordan before he started his ministry, and because at the end of Matthew's gospel, Jesus tells his followers to go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit.

So the first thing we think of when we think about baptism, is cleansing. Water cleans, physically and spiritually. Two other ideas have also been associated with water since the early church, and we'll hear them in a moment, in the prayer we say over the font. One comes from the book of Genesis. God created the world out of a watery waste: the spirit moved over the face of the deep, and gathered the waters of the sky together to create dry land. The other comes from the Exodus. God parted the waters of the Red Sea to let Moses and the Israelites escape from the Egyptians. Both those stories tell us that water is something out of which new life comes.

Which is all very well, but it strikes me as a rather functional view of water.

In all these stories, water is a means to an end, something you have to get through. You don't linger in the Red Sea or the Jordan, any more than we would leave Helen in the font all day. But there's more to water than that. It's also a place to play. When we get into water, whether it's the bath or the sea or a swimming pool, we leave our troubles behind. Water takes us out of the stream of everyday life: we splash about and enjoy the moment: and it reminds us that it's good to be alive in the world God has given us. And that sense that it's good to be alive, is something we hope to share with Helen today.

And water gives a new dimension to our lives. Literally: because we can swim not only back and forth and sideways, but also up and down. But also spiritually. The theologian Tertullian, writing at the end of the second century, says that when we're baptized we become 'little fishes' of Christ, the fisher of men. We become interesting amphibious creatures, who have to know how to live on earth and in heaven, and like the Little Mermaid, we often find it difficult to feel equally at home in both. This may seem strange, but really, entering the water is just going back to our roots. In the womb, a baby lives in its own small sea of fluid, and only reaches dry land for the first time when it's born. When we get into baptismal water, it's as if we're being received back into the womb of God.

Last but not least, water is life itself. Without water, there is no life, biological or spiritual. When we pour out a pitcher of water, when we climb into water, we are celebrating the abundance of life itself, the sheer generosity of God's creation.

There has always been a debate in the church about when is the best moment to be baptized. If someone becomes a Christian when they're grown up, they can be baptized very soon, but some people used to wait till they were on their deathbeds, because that way, they could be sure they wouldn't sin afterwards, and they would die in a state of grace and go straight to heaven. (It's not a popular view any more, but you can see the logic of it.) If a child is born into a Christian family, the question is whether you baptize them as a baby, or wait till they are old enough to make the decision for themselves. Tertullian, whom I mentioned earlier, was strongly against

infant baptism. Not just because he thought that people should make their own decision, but because he was worried - wait for this - about the souls of the godparents. Because if you stand godparent for a child, and you promise on his or her behalf to turn to Christ and reject evil - and then the child turns out to be a little horror - you won't be able to keep your promise, and it's as bad as if you had sinned yourself. Says Tertullian. Don't do it, he says, it's too much of a responsibility, too much of a risk when your own immortal soul is at stake.

Well, this is a sobering thought for all of us, because of course, although we are not all Helen's official godparents, in a wider sense, in the church, we are all parents to each other as well as brothers and sisters.

But it seems to me a bit late to start refusing to take responsibility for a child at its baptism. Because having children at all is a huge responsibility. To bring a whole new person into the world. Who will live out a whole life. With all the struggle, so much to learn, so many hurts and disappointments, so much work, and uncertainty, the falling in and out of love, the illness and suffering and death. Most of us, even here, in a wealthy country that's at peace, think that life is quite hard going a lot of the time. It's amazing that we're so ready to bring more people to share it. But we do, and by the time they come to be baptized, we've already long ago taken responsibility for them.

But, given that we have taken on this responsibility, what we don't do is hold back the best things in life until the child is old enough to decide whether he or she wants them. We don't put children in isolation until they're old enough to choose whether they want a mother and father. We don't keep silent about what's safe to eat, or where it's safe cross the road, until they're old enough to work it out for themselves. We don't wait till they're grown up before offering them an education. Things that matter, we make sure we give our children as soon as possible. To make this life as good as it can be, we use every resource we have.

And that's why I think infant baptism is so important. In baptism we place a new life in the arms of God. We affirm that our lives have a spiritual dimension on earth. We celebrate the life that God gives us and we promise to try to live it well. How can we not want to give that to our children as soon as we can?

If it's a responsibility - if it's a risk - well, taking a risk for love, taking a risk on another person, that is something we understand. Something we're good at, actually. One thing you can say about human beings, we believe in love. We know that nothing makes more difference to life, and nothing does more to make the world a better place.

And taking a risk on love also brings us closer than anything else we do, to God. Because God took a risk on life in creation, and took a risk again and again on the people of Israel, and takes a risk on every one of us. So when we baptize Helen today what we're saying is, that we believe that God believes in us. That God thinks we're all worth loving. The water of baptism stands for the wonderful abundance of life in the love of God. And the best way we know to use that gift, is to share it with someone else, to take them into our arms, and to put them in the arms of God. If that's a risk, then it's the risk that makes life worth living. Amen.