

Baptism of Our Lord (ABC)

It seems to me that, however far they have distanced themselves from the church, most parents still want baptism for their children. It may be for reasons which fall short of the ideal such as pressure from grandparents or to secure a place in the catholic school. I've even heard parents say: "It's time we had the baby done".

However, if we all looked into our conscience, could any of us say, 'hand on heart' that our motives for doing anything of value were always 'whiter than white'. The First Reading says: 'he does not break the crushed reed or quench the wavering flame'. That could easily apply to parents seeking baptism for their children. There are times when our faith is tried and tested, like now with a war in Europe, a wave of strikes, exorbitant utility bills and chaotic scenes in hospitals. Even the church may seem a rather impersonal place for some. At least we've got the 'warm hub'... *and the Panto*. In today's reading from Isaiah, it says: "I have taken you by the hand and formed you" Perhaps, as a catholic community, we need, as it were, to 'take more people by the hand' and encourage them in their wavering faith.

Having said that I don't think the baptism of children should be trivialised in any way where commitment to the church is hit and miss. Baptism is aligned with entry into the church where our faith is nourished and strengthened. If children are not exposed to Sunday Mass then Mass in the school or even R.E. lessons will be mostly academic. Sunday Mass is very much *part and parcel* of being a catholic Christian. The catholic ethos of the school will only be as good as the ecclesial faith of the children and staff which comprise the school community. Otherwise it verges on window dressing. Some parents mistakenly think that putting off baptism until children are old enough to decide in their own time is the way to proceed. To me that's a fallacy. Children are hardly going to decide for

Christ if their links with the church which Christ founded are rather tenuous. Faith is not nourished in a vacuum. For the seeds of baptism to grow, children need to feel part of a community of faith from the beginning. Jesus said: 'let the little children come to me and do not stop them'. Have we ever let them down in this regard?

We know that peer pressure can often cause secondary school pupils to side-step Mass. It's another form of bullying which is rarely gets mentioned. In my experience the happiest teenagers are those who belong to faith groups like Youth 2000 or who join the swell of young people who go to Walsingham' each Summer or attend religious festivals like 'celebrate' and really enjoy them. Bishop Mark O'Toole from Cardiff who attended one of these weekends last year said: 'I was struck by the joy and enthusiasm of so many young people in their faith'.

The upheavals which we encounter in our day to day lives at present such as strikes, war in Europe, covid after effects, exorbitant utility bills and the NHS on a knife edge might be just the wake-up call we all need to prioritise what's important in our lives such as a lively baptismal faith for us and our children which will sustain us in every difficulty.