

## 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 hints from parents or 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 important were always entirely pure. The First Reading says: 'he does not break the crushed reed or quench the wavering flame'. That could easily apply to people seeking baptism for their children. There are times when our faith is tested or tried like during this present pandemic. The church may even seem a rather impersonal place. 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 faith. The synodal pathway which we've already embarked on seems to be pointing us in that direction.

Having said that I don't think the baptism of children should be taken lightly either, where commitment to the church is weak. Baptism is primarily for 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 purely academic. Attending 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 school community. Some people mistakenly think that **putting off baptism** until children are old enough to decide for themselves is the way to proceed. That's a fallacy. Children are hardly going to decide for Christ if their links with the church which Christ founded are practically non-existent. Faith is not nourished in a vacuum. If in ordinary life the children are

gradually introduced to their wider natural family, surely it's only right that they get acquainted with their church family as well which they became part of at their baptism. 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 let them down in this regard?

We know that peer pressure can often cause secondary school pupils to abandon Mass. It's another form of bullying which is rarely mentioned. In my experience the happiest teenagers are not those slaves to social media but those who belong to faith groups like Youth 2000 or who join the swell of young people who go to Walsingham' each Summer or religious festivals like 'celebrate' and really enjoy them. The bishop of Plymouth who attended one of these weekends said last year: 'I was struck by the joy and enthusiasm of so many young people in their faith'.

The present pandemic might be just the wake-up call we all need both young and old to rejuvenate us in our faith and live out our baptism to the full.