

Baptism of Our Lord (B)

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 - to please their 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 even put on hold like during this present pandemic. The church may even seem a forbidding 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 to return to the practice of their faith.

Having said that I don't think the baptism of children should be treated in a sort of cavalier way either, where commitment to the church is not considered important. Baptism is primarily for entry into the church not limited to ensuring a place in the catholic school. If children are not exposed to Sunday Mass then Mass in the school or even R.E. lessons will be purely academic. Taking their children to Sunday Mass is very much part and parcel of endeavouring to bring them up in the faith which parents promised to do on the day of their baptism.

Some people mistakenly think that putting off baptism until children are old enough to decide for themselves is the way to proceed. I can't see that. Children are hardly going to decide for Christ if they've never heard of Him. 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. 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 put any obstacles in the way of our children or grandchildren attending Mass?

We know that peer pressure can often cause secondary school pupils to abandon Mass. It's another form of bullying. In my experience the happiest teenagers are not those slaves to social media but those who belong to faith groups like Youth 2000 or the many young people's groups 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 turn out to be 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.