

Sunday 11 January 2026, Baptism of Christ
The Revd Dr Evan McWilliams

A voice from heaven said, 'This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased.'

If I were to ask you 'what happens when someone is baptised?', what would you say? Would you tell me that when a person is baptised, they are washed clean from original sin? Would you say that in baptism, we are buried with Christ and raised to new life in him? Maybe you would tell me that baptism is a form of entry into the family of Christ.

Over the centuries, the Church has given all of these answers to the question 'What happens when someone is baptised?' Today, we tend to focus on the familial aspect: when someone is baptised, they are made a part of the family of Christ, which is the Church. In other words, baptism is a sort of membership ceremony.

I am a member of a few organisations. Some require me to pay an annual subscription fee. Others have simply asked me to make certain promises to do and act according to their rules. In each case, my membership entails a responsibility and affords me certain benefits.

This isn't a bad way to think about baptism. My membership of the Church, as a baptised Christian- a literally 'Christianed' person (and hence the term christening)- entails the responsibility of public and private prayer and living according to the teaching of Jesus in the Bible. The benefits I receive are the support and guidance of the Church and the hope of eternal life given through a prayerful and ever-maturing faith in Jesus as the Son of God who died for my sins and rose for my justification (that is, to make me right with God).

Unlike some other membership organisations, what the Church offers me is rather greater than what it expects of me. And that's right for an organisation that sees itself as a family. Our families have expectations of us, it's true. And we do have natural responsibilities towards our family members. But what we receive from our families often far outweighs what we put in, and this can be especially true in times of hardship or sadness.

When Jesus was baptised by John in the river Jordan, *a voice from heaven said, 'This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased.'* The Church echoes the voice of God the Father proudly speaking of his Son when someone is baptised. The family of God- all those who have been baptised- welcome a new sibling, a new son, a new daughter. They pray good for their new family member; they dream and hope for a joyful future in faith.

It isn't always easy being part of a family, and that's no more or less true in Christ's family, the Church. But baptism is the great equaliser; no one baptised person is any greater or any lesser than another. We are all equally children of our heavenly Father. And our heavenly Father is equally pleased with us at our baptism.

The question that arises is, what happens next? What happens after I receive the glowing praise of God and the warm welcome of my new family? It's there that the real work begins: getting to know one another, learning the habits and language of the family, contributing to its life, and being willing to receive its input as well as its blessing. This is why for several hundred years in this country parents and godparents were instructed after baptism to 'provide that [the child] may learn the Creed, the Lord's Prayer and the Ten Commandments in the vulgar tongue, and all other things which a Christian ought to know and believe to [their] soul's health.'

Learning just a few of the foundational elements of the Christian faith is a very small expectation when becoming a member of a Christian family. It is a minimal responsibility to which great benefits are attached: the ability to lead a moral life, knowing how to pray, and having some insight into the mystery of Jesus Christ himself, with the hope of eternal life with him after our earthly life has ended. I pray that all those to be baptised today will feel and know themselves to be part of a new and loving family and that, above all things, they will be enabled to hold fast to the faith they confess today and so remain members of the Church for which Our Lord, the beloved Son, lovingly shed his precious blood. Amen.