

# St. Bride's Church of Scotland, Newtonmore

## Remember your Baptism

**Rev. Catherine Buchan**  
**Sunday 21<sup>st</sup> August 2011**

Mark 1:4-11, 16-19  
Psalm 116:12-19

“Remember your baptism! remember your baptism!” This was the catchphrase of one of my professors when I studied theology in Chicago. Remember your baptism. And so I would duly remember the occasion - 4th of February 1979 - when I was baptised. It's an event which I am unlikely to forget - I was two days short of my sixteenth birthday.

Because my own baptism is quite memorable, it was some time before it hit me that for most people in my class, as for most people here today, what my professor was asking was a literally impossibility. Very few memories stretch back far enough to remember carrying us into church, up to the font, and handing us over to the minister to be baptised. We were just too young.

And anyway, what does it matter? What relevance can a rite performed with water on you as a baby possibly have to the joys, sorrows, stresses and choices of your nowadays life? That depends on how you view your baptism. If it is just a thing done to children, part of being properly brought up, then there's no more to be said. Or if it is a matter of enrolling a baby in a sort of club, with the guarantee that all members go to heaven, then we've done the deed and that's all there is to it.

But is that really all there is to it? If so, why do we make such a big deal of it, performing baptisms before the whole congregation, not in private ceremonies, and having the church take vows? Why was my professor so hung up on the matter, insisting that we remember our baptism - the fact of our baptism, even if we couldn't remember the event - in season and out? Just what are we doing here, and how relevant is it to the life we live?

Lily Ann doesn't yet know that she has been baptised, nor will she long remember being brought here this morning, and having her forehead splashed with water. But this morning I wonder if we can look ahead at some of what life may bring for Lily Ann, and see what this baptism may come to mean to her. As we do so, it may be that we will see again what it has meant and still means to us if we are baptised. It may help you see the merit of remembering your baptism.

Hannah has promised to bring Lily Ann up to know Jesus as her Lord and Saviour, and we have promised to help her. What can Lily Ann expect that promise to look like in her life? It may mean that her family will talk to her about Jesus from an early age, so that before she can talk much herself, she will be aware that Jesus is very much a part of her family's life.

Probably it will mean that she will be brought to church, and to Sunday School. Certainly from the very earliest time we should go out of our way to make sure that Lily Ann feels that church is a loving, friendly place to be, where she is welcome and can feel confident and unafraid. Lily Ann has been baptised into Christ, and the church is the body of Christ, so it is where she belongs.

As she grows she will, we hope, witness other baptisms. It's important that children should be allowed to be present at baptisms: they, as much as any of us, need to be reminded that this is what has been done for them. That's why we have baptisms early in the service, when the children are present. It's not just because the babies are so cute and it's “nice” for the children to see them. It's because the whole church should be involved. Some other churches, like the one I attended when I

was very small, do baptisms at the end of the service, and then the children come back in from Sunday School to witness them.

So Lily Ann will witness other baptisms, and she will want to know what we're doing and why, and has it happened to her? And so, gradually, Lily Ann will come to realise that she has been baptised, and a little of what that means. She may understand at first only that it means that Jesus loves her, but that's a good foundation on which to build.

In time Lily Ann will grow from a toddler to a little girl, and then to a bigger girl. She will walk and talk and run and ask all kinds of questions. She will start school and learn to read and write, and before she can do either very well she will know how to operate the DVD player or boot up a computer. She will learn a lot. And some of what she will learn, we hope, will be what it means to be a Christian. She already knows that Jesus loves her, but now she may begin to learn how to love Jesus back. She will hear about the life Jesus lived on earth, the wonderful things he did and some of what he taught. She will be reminded, year by year, about his miraculous birth and his still more miraculous death and resurrection. And she will begin to understand why Jesus died.

After all, by now Lily Ann has a fairly extensive experience of being told she's naughty, that she mustn't do certain things, and why not. She knows she shouldn't snatch and be selfish but share; and she knows she shouldn't hit people or be rude. And she knows that she does do these things, only too often. And so, if we keep the promises we made this morning, eventually Lily Ann will understand that Jesus can help her to do what she ought and not what she knows is wrong.

Because Lily Ann, like all of us, has been baptised into Christ's death, and so all that Christ accomplished by that death is available to her. St. Paul put it this way:

*We know that our old self was crucified with him so that the body of sin might be destroyed, and we might no longer be enslaved to sin (Romans 6:6).*

That might still be a little hard to understand, especially for Lily Ann as she is still growing, but what it boils down to is that in baptism Christ extends to us the opportunity to put our past sins behind us and live a new life.

By now perhaps Lily Ann has started secondary school. She is growing away from the security of home, just a little, and beginning to think for herself. It's not a safe world out there. She needs to learn to stick up for herself against peer pressure. Nowadays it may be pressure to take drugs or to go too far with boys; to join in a less-than-innocent gang or to maintain a savvy street-cred. by law-breaking or alcoholic excess. What was it when you were young - what was it that the crowd wanted and you, perhaps, failed to resist? What will it be in ten or twelve years' time, when Lily Ann hits the rebellious age?

Lily Ann will want to be her own person and think for herself, and now is when she needs to learn more about her baptism. It may be that up until now she hasn't given it much thought beyond knowing that it happened. But now she begins to ask questions. Questions like, how can something that was done to her without her consent when she was too little to understand really make her a Christian? Isn't this to suggest that baptism is a magical rite, done for insurance purposes after death?

Teenagers ask lots of questions, often difficult questions which we would rather not have to try to answer. It is often at this stage in life that they drift away from the church, or storm out angrily, declaring that it is boring or irrelevant. Will this be what Lily Ann does when she begins to ask her questions? Will she feel that no one hears her, or that they hear her but can't answer because she has found holes in this faith of ours?

She may. It happens. But not if we are keeping our promises, if we have learned to love Lily Ann as she grows, so that she knows that this is a place where her questions will be heard and receive honest answers. Let's assume that Lily Ann will be lucky. Perhaps her Mum can't answer her questions, but she decides to find someone who can, and so one day, maybe in the course of a long walk together, someone explains to Lily Ann about baptism.

Now she learns that baptism doesn't make her a Christian. No one can make her a Christian against her will. Baptism is a sign of an agreement between God and people. God agrees to give new life, to wipe away our sin and admit us to the privileges of family which Jesus won for us on the cross. We must agree to accept the offer and to allow our lives to be entwined with Christ's life. We have to agree to consider ourselves dead - dead to the selfishness which leads to sin; and alive to God's new life flowing through us.

And where, asks Lily Ann, does baptism come in?

It is a sign of all that is involved, she is told. It is a sign of Christ's death and resurrection, and a sign that our old sinful self can be put to death as well. It is a sign of our being washed clean by Christ, and God giving us his Spirit to lead us into a new life.

But it is more than a sign, it is a seal. It is what unites us with Christ, if we take up our option. It is as if in baptism we were smeared with sealant - glue - so that when we are ready to take up our side of the agreement, or covenant, we're already prepared to be firmly joined on to Christ.

Lily Ann is puzzled, as well she might be. So her teacher takes an envelope. "Look," she says. "This envelope is designed to be a secure receptacle for a letter. But if the flap is open then it's not much use. No one would trust the Post Office to get the letter from A to B without losing it. If I lick the flap, then it's sticky. But if I don't actually press the flap onto the envelope, then the thing still doesn't fulfil its purpose.

"You are a receptacle designed to hold God's new life, but you're like an open envelope. Baptism is like licking the flap. But unless you yourself choose to follow Christ then it still won't help much. The envelope is still open until you choose to close it. Until you make that choice, baptism is an invitation to you. After you have chosen, if you do, then baptism is a reminder that God is giving you his help every day; that he is keeping his side of the agreement."

After all lot of thought Lily Ann sees that this is an opportunity not to be missed. None of her friends are doing it, so she calls herself a rebel, and goes ahead and gets confirmed, professing her faith and becoming a full member of the church in her own right.

And is that the end of the story? Baptism of infants points to confirmation, after all. Now Lily Ann has got there, is that the end of its relevance?

I hope not! After all, she still has a lot of her life to lead. She will continue to have questions about her faith and how to work it out in practice. There will be the big questions, about her future, her employment: what will motivate her when she chooses what she wants to do? Will she remember her baptism and steer away from anything shady, or harmful to others? There will be questions about her relationships and how she will act towards others - her parents, her friends, her colleagues, her boy-friends and, maybe, her husband. Will she remember her baptism and that the life she now leads is Christ's life, a life of love and thoughtfulness, and of principle.

And as she lives out her life, Lily Ann will also have to face the small daily questions which come our way. What to do about a difficult neighbour or colleague? How to spend the money she earns? How to use her leisure time? In all of these matters surely she would be helped by remembering her baptism, that her selfish self is dead and buried and that she is primarily alive to God.

It's a sad thing to think about such a happy child as Lily Ann is now, but at some point in her life she will have to face grief and sorrow. Someone she loves will die; a friendship which is important to her will be severed; she may be falsely accused of something and feel isolated and lonely. At such times more than ever she will need to remember her baptism, because amongst other things it means that she need never be alone. Lily Ann has been baptised into Christ, and therefore into the body of Christ, the church. All of us, in any church, who are also baptised should be there for her with love and understanding when she needs it.

Finally Lily Ann will pass beyond this life and then she won't need baptism as a sign and seal of her union with Christ, a union which she has chosen to accept and which she has, with God's help, done her best to live out. Because then she will see Christ face to face and be welcomed into the joy of her Lord.

So remember your baptism!

When life gets you down, remember your baptism.

When you are full of joy, remember your baptism.

When you are making decisions, remember your baptism.

When you are losing your powers and fear to be a burden, remember your baptism.

When you feel lonely, remember your baptism.

When someone asks you for help, remember your baptism.

It is the glue which reinforces our acceptance of the new life Christ offers. Remember your baptism and it will remind you that every day, several times a day, we should consider ourselves dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus. Remember your baptism, that you are baptised into Christ's death and resurrection, remember it often. Think about it, reflect on it and more and more you will come to understand the marvels of what Christ has done for you, and what you may do for and with him.

To God be the glory and praise for all the riches he gives us in Christ Jesus. Amen.