**Stowe Church April 3rd 2022 Sacraments - Baptism and Communion**

**Luke 22:14-23 and Acts 13:22-25**

Sacraments : a means by which Christians partake in the ‘ mystery of Christ’

It implies that something ’happens’ and grace is infused. Augustine of Hippo described it as ‘the visible form of an invisible grace. For Protestants there are two: Baptism and the Eucharist. In the catholic Church they include 5 more (confirmation, Matrimony, Hoy orders, Extreme Unction, penance)

Baptism has always been the sacrament which admits us to membership of the Christian church family. Baptism – ie immersion or sprinkling with water was practised in Judaism in admission of proselytes. There is archaeological evidence of baptisteries in the Qumran community. There was no suggestion that John the Baptist’s baptism for repentance was anything new. But John always made it clear that someone greater than himself was coming and when Jesus was baptised it was taking baptism to a new level when the Holy Spirit appeared as a dove and God proclaimed Jesus as His beloved Son. John continued baptising for repentance, but Jesus’ disciples later are mentioned as baptising.

Jesus in his commission to his disciples before He ascended included ‘Go and make disciples… baptising them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit’ and the idea that Baptism was the means of entry to the Christian Church was the norm from then on. Some examples in Acts : after peter’s Pentecost sermon; Phillip’s encounter with the Ethiopian; Peter and Cornelius; Lydia and the jailer in Philippi.

Paul describes Baptism as being ‘ buried with Christ in baptism in which you were also raised with Him’ *(Col 2: 12)* . He also says ‘there is one baptism’ *(Eph 4;5)* meaning that when a person has been baptised there is no need to do it again.

Infant or Adult baptism.? As a sacrament there is a sense that it is the outward sign of something happening to those being baptised. That God’s Spirit is working in the person. Some parts of the Church do talk about Baptismal regeneration and therefore even though a baby cannot ask for or show a desire for baptism that the sacrament has an effect on them spiritually. Other parts of the Church hold to the need for the person to be old enough to declare repentance and faith before being baptised. One can understand the desire of Christian parents to have their babies baptised. It is done in faith and puts the responsibility on the parents and Godparents to see that the child is nurtured as a Christian. There are examples of whole families being baptised Cornelius, Lydia and the Jailer so it is there in the NT. Confirmation is now the opportunity for personal public confession of faith. It can be awkward if the baby comes to a personal faith in Jesus after their baptism and confirmation! Fortunately, it is more commonly realised that you can renew baptismal vows in the setting of a Confirmation service or particularly at Eastertime.

So, baptism is vital for a Christian as it marks their desire to become part of the worldwide Christian Church . Repentance and faith are necessary and God promises His Holy Spirit in our lives to guide and strengthen us. Let us treasure our baptism and, if we wish, renew our baptismal vows as an act of witness.

The Lord’s Supper, The Eucharist (thanksgiving), Holy Communion, Mass – all refer to the same thing. From the earliest days, this service was a central part of Christian worship. The 3 synoptic gospels include Jesus taking bread and wine at the end of the Passover meal as almost the last thing he did before his arrest. It was Jesus himself who used the words ‘this is my body’ and ‘this is my blood’, but it is in Paul’s account ‘which he had received from the Lord’ that Jesus says ‘ do this in remembrance of me’ and ’as often as you eat this bread and drink this cup you proclaim the Lord’s death until He comes’. *(1Cor 11:23-34).*

Bread and wine/ Christ’s body and blood. What happens at the consecration prayer?

The official Catholic doctrine (from **Robertus** in th 9th century) is that the bread and wine actually become in substance the body and blood of Christ while the appearance does not change. This is transubstantiation.

**Luther** came up with the idea of consubstantiation when the bread and wine become the body and blood when consumed. **Zwingli** objected to both of the above and held that the service is merely a memorial to Christ in honour of his death. **Calvin** felt that they were all missing the point and said that Christ is spiritually present in the bread and wine as if “set before our very eyes” and he spoke of ‘feasting on Christ”. **Cranmer** when compiling the BCP did a very successful fudge which can be summed up in a line of a communion hymn “thou art here , we ask not how”.

Please notice, too, that Jesus refers to the bread and wine as signifying a new Covenant for them. God had made a covenant with the Hebrew people - a solemn promise and undertaking that He would be their God and they would be His people – so long as they were faithful to Him. Now Jesus is extending that covenant to all who believe in Him and share in the Lord’s Supper. He is promising a special relationship with Him to all believers.

The important thing is that we value the communion service and it does indeed bring us closer to Christ. We are spiritually strengthened by receiving the bread and wine. We are also obeying Christ’s injunction to remember Him and to proclaim His death until He comes again. We need to come prepared … when I was confirmed at 11 years old in a high Anglican Church our vicar asked the candidates to come fasting ie no breakfast and many people used to observe this. Not too difficult if you came at 8am. But we do need to make some preparation … and the whole service is reverent as well as joyful. It is why we are careful with any consecrated wafers and wine left over. Paul to the Corinthian Church : “ Let a man examine himself and so eat of the bread and drink of the cup. For anyone who eats and drinks without discerning the body eats and drinks judgment upon himself.

So Baptism and Holy Communion are the two sacraments for the CofE and other Protestant denominations.

Baptism is the entry point to the Christian family and has been since the Church began. Christian baptism is not just for repentance, but also has the promise of the presence of the Holy Spirit in our lives. It is not just a rite of passage. It requires an expression of faith in Jesus and needs preparation and intention – either on the part of the candidate or of parents and Godparents. (CoE vicars have a requirement to baptise anyone within their parish who asks for it.) This should provide a great opportunity for teaching about Christ.

The Communion is a time to ‘proclaim the Lord’s death until He comes’, but for us it is a service where we come particularly close to Christ as we receive the bread and wine and this needs to be a regular and special part of our Christian journey . It is for the Christian Family and so some evidence or sign of faith is required . “come because you have a little faith and would like to grow in it”. It is to be held in reverence.

God has given these sacraments to His Church and we have access to the grace of God through them.

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