

'Water poured; grace given'Is 40: "*Here is your God*"Ps 103: *You send forth Your Spirit ...*Titus 2–3: *it was for no reason except His own compassion that He saved us*Lk 3:15–16,21–22: "*someone is coming. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit*"

When I have been asked about my new ministry here, how much of a change it is to my previous priestly life in a parish, one thing I have often referred to is how different it is in terms of the sacraments: no infant baptisms, no weddings (well, not yet!), no visits to the sick with Holy Communion and for Anointing, ... and no funerals. Much of the 'bread and butter' of *parish* life is taken up with these particular moments of life: infant baptisms, weddings, funerals ... but not so here.

However, as it turns out, I was asked to celebrate a friend's baby's baptism in Suffolk on the Bank Holiday after Boxing Day — what a joyful occasion that was! — and since then a young friend has died at 44 (whom I was able to anoint prior to her death), and my own Mum has died too ... 2 funerals to celebrate in the coming month. So, rather unforeseen, the usual breadth of sacramental life breaks in on us, the life-giving grace of our beloved

Saviour.

Baptism is, of course, the very foundation of our lives as Christians, the 'gateway' to the sacramental life and all that the Lord promises to give us to sustain us from the cradle to the grave. Because many of us have been baptized as infants, it is sometimes hard to conjure up thoughts of it, or even to reflect on its immense importance in our lives. (I was baptized at 18 days.) We often have no memories of it — I'm not sure if I have ever even seen photos of my Baptism — and yet it is that supreme moment in which I was joined on to Christ for my life as a Christian. To enter life with Christ is the completion of being alive. We can be fit and well physically, and have plenty of natural life, but without baptism in Christ, where are we going? We are made body and *soul*, which makes us supernatural creatures, made for life with God ... if we are not baptized, then that supernatural life is not being sustained, which means that our destiny as human beings is not being fulfilled.

If Baptism had not been important, then Jesus would

not have entered into it. But He did. Jesus clearly made a big thing of it. John the Baptist prepared for Jesus's coming with his ritual of Baptism "of water." Then it was sanctified and made a giving of the Holy Spirit that day of Jesus's Baptism, when the heavens opened. The Preface of the Mass of St John the Baptist puts it really succinctly: "He baptized Christ, the Giver of Baptism, in waters made holy by the One who was baptized." When Jesus was baptized, baptism ceased to be merely an outward *sign* of repentance; it started to be a truly effective *sacrament* of grace: a real giving of the Spirit and of spiritual life to those receiving it. All this is signified by "the heavens opening" above Jesus: not just as a sign of His favour with God, His divinity, but also for us to receive what God wishes to pour out on us. Heaven is not opened for us without the giving of the Spirit in Jesus Christ. Our *guarantee* of this is to be baptized. We can't guarantee to be saved without joining our lives to Jesus in Baptism.

What a precious sacrament this is, then, and one we should remind ourselves of regularly. I know that the Holy

Water is 'missing' from the chapel entrance at the moment, but our blessing of Holy Water and being sprinkled with it gives a tangible reminder of the waters in which we are washed and saved.

I want to make 2 practical points about Baptism:

- (i) We should all be clear about the necessity of Baptism, and therefore its real importance for all of us, even the youngest. So it's not good for parents to put off the baptism of their children unnecessarily. Of course the Church wishes people of all and any age to come to faith; people of any age can be baptized into Christ. But for those of us already in the faith it's not right to put off our children's baptism. Ideally children should — and can — be baptized at least within three months of their birth. Why deprive a child of their life in the Church with Jesus without any reason? The spiritual care of the child, who deserves the best, includes that they be members of Christ from the very start.
- (ii) Every Catholic should know that in case of necessity,

especially perhaps at a premature birth, a baptism can be performed by anyone. Simply take pure water (from the tap!) and pour three times, saying *John/Joan I baptize you in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit*. I have had at least one friend baptize her own daughter — that was in a case where she could not envisage the baptism taking place at all imminently because of the opposition of the girl's father. In such cases, at a later date this needs to be regularized with the Church's registers etc., but the baptism itself would be valid.

Both these practical points reinforce in our minds the extreme importance of the Baptism sacrament. Every time we bless ourselves with holy water we are reminded of it: that thanks to Christ; thanks to our parents/godparents; thanks to our parish; thanks to the loving Christians who surround us; we have come to be born anew in the life of Jesus Christ, the only life that matters in the long run ... from cradle to grave, and from the grave to perpetual light.