

# Wigston Benefice

## The Sacraments

*A sermon series*

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## Introduction

*Sacraments ordained of Christ be not only badges or tokens of Christian men's (sic.) profession, but rather they be certain sure witnesses, and effectual signs of grace, and God's good will towards us, by the which he doth work invisibly in us, and doth not only quicken, but also strengthen and confirm our Faith in him. (Article XXV of Religion)*

The Sacraments are an integral part of our Christian Life and part of the foundations of the Universal Church. Many Christians might be able to call to mind "an outward and visible sign of an inward and visible grace" as a familiar definition of what a sacrament is. Yet, for many in the Church of England, there's a mixed relationship with 'The Sacraments' and what they mean, or perhaps just a lack of teaching and understanding.

Something we're really keen to encourage and help people to understand is that the Sacraments of the Church are given by God to encourage, feed and strengthen us and the whole Church in faith throughout our whole lives. The sacraments are tangible signs of God's work and presence with us and within us. **Most importantly, the sacraments are there for us from our very earliest days through to our final hours on earth.**

In traditional 'catholic teaching', there are *seven* sacraments. These are sometimes broken down into the 'Dominical Sacraments', namely Eucharist & Baptism; and five others: Confirmation, Unction (anointing), Reconciliation (sometimes called 'Confession'), Ordination, and Marriage.

The Church of England, perhaps unsurprisingly, has a mixed relationship with the idea of Sacraments. Article XXV of *The 39 Articles of Religion* makes it quite plain that Baptism and the Eucharist are the only sacraments because they are clearly commanded by Jesus in the Gospels. The other five are deemed to be 'states of life allowed by Scripture' but are not explicitly commanded so don't enjoy the same status.

This booklet is not intended to argue the particularities of what constitutes a sacrament or not. In line with many parts of the Church of England in the present day, however, we write on the basis that the seven Sacraments of the Church are tangible gifts of God for our good and the good of the whole Church, given that we might know God's grace and presence in our lives and in the outworking of our faith through the entirety of our earthly lives. We hope that this exploration might encourage and help you in your spiritual life and offer you renewed insights into God's presence amongst his people and the sustenance that he gives to us.

*Fr Chris & Fr Nick*

# The Eucharist

*Fr Nick*

Lord Jesus Christ,  
we thank you that in this wonderful sacrament  
you have given us the memorial of your passion:  
grant us so to reverence the sacred mysteries  
of your body and blood  
that we may know within ourselves  
and show forth in our lives the fruits of your redemption;  
for you are alive and reign with the Father  
in the unity of the Holy Spirit,  
one God, now and for ever.

**Amen.**

*Readings: Genesis 14.18-20 & John 6.51-58*

Imagine that you are just sitting down at a table. What is the occasion? It is a ten-year old's birthday party: try to imagine the ten-year-old as your granddaughter, niece, or perhaps the daughter of a friend. Everything is ready: the birthday cake is sitting waiting for its candles to be lit, and the place is choc-a-bloc with balloons. On another table sits a pile of items, large and small, wrapped up in shiny paper.

All the guests have arrived, and then the doorbell rings. Who is it? You rush to the door. It turns out to be a Martian, an alien from outer space. Fortunately, the Martian speaks excellent English. He asks if he can come in. You agree and introduce him to the other guests at the party. Once the shock of having a Martian in your midst disappears, the party goes into full swing. Everyone is enjoying themselves. The Martian, however, stands in amazement at what is going on. He starts to ask you questions. Why do they pull funny things that make a bang? Why are they wearing funny hats? Why is the little girl unwrapping all those parcels? Oh, and why is someone trying to set fire to a cake?!

Every answer you give seems to complicate matters. It's her birthday, you say. You mean she's just been born, says the alien. No, she was born ten years ago, you reply. So, what is special about that, says the alien. Why are you giving her things? We do so because it shows her that she is special, you answer. Why are you setting fire to the cake, the Martian asks. We are not, you say, they are candles. But the light in this room is perfectly fine, says the alien. And so, the questions and answers continue. In the

end, you get so fed up with the Martian asking questions that you might just as well throw the cake in his face.

That was a somewhat imaginative scenario. I am sure you will never have to explain a birthday to a Martian anytime soon. Yet, I hope this scenario will get you thinking.

Like many aspects of the church, and especially when it comes to the sacraments, there is a challenge over how you describe and explain things. There will be many new to the church, or who may never have even stepped into a building, who will witness something like a baptism or confirmation. To them, it may be a little like the Martian seeing a birthday party for the first time. In the case of that party, there are traditional elements, but many of the components have a purpose, just like the services and practices in church.

Today we are focusing on the Eucharist, which, like the party visited by the Martian, is again a party of sorts: a gathering of a community, an expression of love, a sign of fellowship and hope. The Eucharist, like the party, involves objects as well, though quite different to the wrapped-up birthday presents, the cake, candles, which themselves have meaning. Indeed, try explaining elements of the Eucharist to a Martian who has no concept of what the breaking of bread or drinking of wine implies.

It is therefore a good thing to look anew and afresh at those things we may take for granted. Those things which may have become routine. We need to look at the Eucharist with fresh eyes, like the Martian and that birthday party. What does this sacrament really mean for me? Why do I do what I do? In many ways, we need to view each encounter anew and with increased gratitude. Perhaps the various lockdowns and restrictions have forced us into doing just that!

If we were explaining this sacrament to our Martian, he would have to learn that the Eucharist goes under many different names. This is due, partly, to the way the church has developed, and changed, over the centuries. The word Eucharist is from the Greek *eucharista* to mean 'giving thanks or 'thanksgiving'. Sometimes we refer to it, or the service proper, as the Mass, a word derived from the Latin *missa*, meaning dismissal, the sending out of the congregation at the end of the service; the label Holy Communion emphasises that this sacrament draws the individual even closer into deeper relationship, or communion with Christ. Another description is 'The Lord's Supper'. There are no doubt other labels, other descriptions, used by other church communities.

What is clear, though, is that this sacrament is central to the life of the Christian disciple. This sacrament of eating broken bread, accompanied under usual circumstances by wine, has its origins in a gathering. Ok, this gathering was not like the birthday party with which I begun this sermon, but a gathering of people, joined (in the most part) by love and fellowship, who were concerned with sharing possessions and love. One need only look at the gospel narratives to read of that Passover meal, when Jesus gave thanks and broke bread. Take this bread, this is my body given for you – do this in remembrance of me. The wine, likewise, as the blood. So important was this act, simple though it was, that we remember it each Sunday and at other times during the week. When the priest says those words, and as we eat and drink, it is a moment which takes us back to that event over two thousand years ago, to that night when Christ was betrayed. This act also links us with millions of Christians around the whole world, with those who can display their faith publicly, and those who must keep it secret.

If you told our Martian that we were eating the body of Christ and drinking his blood, he would look a little perplexed. Mind you, theologians throughout the ages have argued over what it all means. What occurs when the bread and wine are consecrated at the altar, and what happens when we consume them? What is it all about? As with anything related to faith, it is worth looking at the Bible as our starter for ten. In today's gospel reading, taken from John, Jesus has much to say about the sacrament, even before the final meal itself. Jesus describes himself in terms of the 'living bread', a gift from heaven and the source of life everlasting. This is in direct contrast to the episode in the Old Testament, when God sent manna to feed Moses and the Israelites in the desert following the exodus from Egypt. Divine food, yes, but food given to sustain bodies in a physical sense. Jesus was teaching a new truth.

Jesus, the 'living bread', met a need beyond the earthly, beyond the physical. Jesus is the 'living bread' that sustains us spiritually and gives us eternal life. It was Jesus who came from heaven to earth to give life and salvation. And it is by partaking in the sacrament of Eucharist, that God feeds us. It may appear to be ordinary bread and wine on the outside, but God is doing so much more. God's grace is acting through the ordinary to do the extraordinary.

Again, theologians have argued over what happens to the bread and wine at consecration. You may have your own views, but for me, personally, Jesus is made present in a very real sense in the bread and the wine. If we look again at that passage from John, Jesus says "those who eat my flesh

and drink my blood abide in me, and I in them.” Abide is a rather old-fashioned word by today’s standards, but it suggests a very personal, steadfast and rooted relationship with another person. By participating in the Lord’s Supper, we are engaging in a deep, close and committed relationship with Jesus, and he with us. Although it may be difficult to express what we feel about the Eucharist in words, eating bread and drinking wine is an incredibly special moment for each of us. It is a personal encounter with the risen and ascended Lord at that moment in time. When I speak of time, participating in the Eucharist takes us back to that first Last Supper. It is also rooted in the now, in this present moment, but is also a taste of that eternal banquet in which we will partake. The past, present and future, ordained by God, comes together when we eat bread and drink wine.

Giving a sermon on the Eucharist in the year 2021 is an exceedingly difficult task, especially as only bread can be administered to the faithful, due to the regulations for our own health. I have struggled with this sermon. Understandably, it is, and has been, an awfully hard and difficult time for many Christians and there are no easy answers. With a successful vaccination programme, there is light on the horizon. In a way, just like the Israelites in the Old Testament, we are experiencing our own form of exile: things will get better, and we look forward to a time when we can take both bread and wine. But we are **still** receiving bread – and Christ is not divided. He is wholly in bread and wholly in wine. The outer sign may be impaired when we have communion in one kind, but the inner grace is undiminished. If anything, the past year has taught us how precious the Eucharist, or communion, is to all of us; it is a wonderful gift from God. Jesus sacrificed himself for our salvation; it is that sacrifice which we remember at the Eucharist. In a way, it is fitting that we are making our own voluntary sacrifices now, for the health and safety of everyone else. Just imagine the joy when we can worship and mark Christ’s sacrifice in the usual way. Now that really is a reason for a party! **Amen.**

## **Notes**

1. *The story of the Martian and the birthday party has been adapted from Tom Wright’s The Meal Jesus Gave Us: Understanding Holy Communion, rev. edn. (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2015). This slim volume includes lots of other interesting thoughts on this sacrament.*

2. *Those comments about taking communion in one kind, which are noted in the final paragraph, have been taken from a sermon preached by Rev. Canon Chris Pullin, Chancellor of Hereford Cathedral, on 8 March 2020. The sermon can be found at the following website: <https://www.herefordcathedral.org/sermons-2020>.*

## **Anointing** ('*Holy Unction*')

*Fr Nick*

Heavenly Father,  
you anointed your Son Jesus Christ  
with the Holy Spirit and with power  
to bring to us all the blessings of your kingdom.  
Anoint your Church with the same Holy Spirit,  
that we who share in his suffering and victory  
may bear witness to the gospel of salvation;  
through Jesus Christ, your Son our Lord,  
who is alive and reigns with you  
in the unity of the Holy Spirit,  
one God, now and for ever.

**Amen.**

*Readings: James 5.13-18 & Mark 6.7-13*

George Frederick Handel, most famous for his *Messiah*, composed an anthem for the coronation of King George II in 1727. It starts with the words "Zadok the priest, and Nathan the prophet, anointed Solomon king", and has been sung at every royal coronation since then, including that of our present Queen. The anthem references the moment, recorded in the First Book of Kings, when Zadok took a horn of oil and anointed Solomon to a position ordained by God. Why is this special? Putting oil on someone's head sounds rather ordinary, doesn't it?

It is true that oil is an ordinary substance. If you think of the Middle East, where most of the Biblical events took place, oil is a plentiful item. This is still the case today. Oil, which is obtained by pressing olives, has many uses. It can be burned as fuel for heat and light – just think of the little clay lamps that crop up in museum cases – and used for cooking. It is ordinary stuff. However, like the bread and wine consecrated on the altar, oil can be made special by God for his own purposes. The oil used by the priests in our churches has been blessed by the bishop, commonly on Maundy Thursday at a what is called a Chrism Mass, and so is set aside for something extraordinary.

This oil can be used in many ways to remind us of God's continuing love for us, but it is much more. Oil placed on an individual, often called unction (from the Latin *unguere*, to anoint), commonly accompanied by prayer and the sign of the cross, is an outward reminder of God's power working in the world in a very real way. I have mentioned its use at the coronation of

monarchs: so sacred is this moment that a canopy was held over Queen Elizabeth II's head when she was anointed in 1953 at her Coronation. Oil is applied to the forehead of an individual when they are baptised, or confirmed, or ordained a priest. The oil points to the gift of the holy spirit on that person, that they are 'sealed' by the Spirit, and set aside for God's purposes. The oil used here is known as chrism, and it is olive oil mixed with balsam, which infuses the mixture with a fragrance.

If we look at the Scripture readings provided for today, we learn that anointing can be done for other purposes. In both the Epistle of James, and Mark's gospel, we see that oil is used in the ministry of healing. Jesus' heart was centred on healing in all its forms. In his day, sickness was often viewed as the result of evil, or wrong-doing, or even the work of demonic powers, and so those who were suffering from illnesses were often marginalised by society. Through his acts of healing, Jesus delivered people from those things that imprisoned them; he was offering them forgiveness, reconciling them to God, and in many cases bringing a physical healing, too.

Healing of the whole person takes many forms, both physical and spiritual. And so, when a priest anoints someone who is sick in body, mind or spirit, the anointing is a means of God's grace to act in that person. This may (possibly) result in what we would describe as an obvious cure, but more importantly, it reassures the one who suffers that God is present; the anointing offers wholeness, comfort and courage. God will act in God's own way, which may not be exactly what we expect. It is interesting to remember that the word 'salvation' comes from a Latin root to mean 'healing'. Jesus, through his death and resurrection, brought us salvation and with it healing in all its forms. Likewise, anointing those near death, often called extreme unction, forms part of the preparation for death, which may also include confession and absolution, along with the final reception of the sacrament of Holy Communion. Although we will eventually die, this sacrament prepares us for our ultimate healing and salvation.

Oil, therefore, is an ordinary substance, but one made extraordinary by God to make his presence known in our world. It works in people. Through the act of anointing, God brings grace, healing and reconciliation to those he created in his image. We should also remember that we know Jesus as 'the Christ'. The Greek word *Christos*, and the Latin word *Messiah*, both mean 'anointed one'. Jesus the healer, through his death and resurrection, and gift of the Holy Spirit, allows this sacrament, and many others, to bring us God's grace, his comfort and his peace. **Amen.**



## **Reconciliation (*confession*)**

*Fr Chris*

God of unbounded grace,  
you declare the power of your reconciling love  
in the death and resurrection of our Saviour Jesus Christ.  
Teach us, who live only in your forgiveness,  
to forgive one another;  
heal our divisions and cast out our fears;  
through Jesus Christ your Son our Lord,  
who is alive and reigns with you, in the unity of the Holy Spirit,  
one God, now and for ever.

**Amen.**

*Readings: 1 John 1.5 – 2.2 & Luke 15.11-32*

Of all the sacraments of the Church, Reconciliation, usually known as 'Penance' or 'Confession' is perhaps the one most prone to misunderstanding, parody or even suspicion. It's often portrayed by TV & Film for dramatic effect - usually in a deeply unhelpful way with creepy priests, sat in a dark box with a questionable understanding of how the 'Seal of the Confessional' actually works. Granted, for some people this was sadly what constituted reality in the early days of their faith, which is a crying shame.

Sometimes the portrayals just lead to the impression that one can say three Our Fathers and a couple of Hail Marys before going off to repeat the same mistake with abandon. In some parts of the Church, it might simply be dismissed as a '[Roman] Catholic' practice that doesn't apply to the Church of England.

Such views, apart from being wrong and unhelpful, diminish and put down a sacrament that should actually be a joyful reflection of God's love for us and something that has the potential to liberate us from the burdens we can so often carry whilst enriching our relationship with God and our life of faith.

The act of acknowledging and confessing our sins before God has plenty of biblical warrant, along with a significant weight of history within the Church Universal. Though it wouldn't stretch to calling it a 'sacrament', even the *Book of Common Prayer* provides the opportunity in the service of *The Visitation of the Sick* for someone to unburden themselves to a priest, for fear of dying unabsolved of a grave sin.

At the heart of the Sacrament is the desire to make right our relationship with God, breaking down the barriers and impediments caused by our sin. It's that same desire which leads us in the Church to seek to refer to it as the 'Sacrament of Reconciliation', rather than simply 'Confession', because that's only part of the story.

1 John 1 lays out, in no uncertain terms, the realities of human life:

"If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us."

But, in equally clear terms, there's a promise:

"If we confess our sins, he who is faithful and just will forgive us our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness."

The promise and restoration of the Sacrament of Reconciliation finds its roots deep in the heart of our baptism which finds its foundation in the death and resurrection of Jesus. Through the sacrifice of Jesus on the Cross, our sins were taken away and the barrier of sin that had built up between God and humanity broken down. Through our baptism we share in that forgiveness of sins and a renewed & restored relationship with God.

Yet, in spite of this relationship with God, we know that we continue to sin and do wrong, to the detriment of our life with God. Just as we do in the best of human relationships, we need to hold our hands up and say "sorry", even if it feels deeply uncomfortable or wounds our pride to have to acknowledge that what we said or did was wrong.

Very often, it might be that our 'General Confession', i.e. the prayer we say at the beginning of the Eucharist, will be an appropriate way to bring our sins before God. The Roman Catholic Church has for many centuries tried to categorise sins into 'venial' and 'mortal'. On a slightly satirical level; differentiating between getting angry at being cut up at the traffic lights and committing adultery. More seriously, it's about thinking when it's most appropriate to use a general confession or to confess in the presence of a priest.

In the Church of England, we tend not to be as delineated as that. Instead, an opportunity can be provided where people feel, like the BCP idea, that they can't quieten their conscience because of a 'weighty matter'. In that case, they may feel they need to make a confession in the presence of a priest. It's important to note that the confession is

made to God; but also, as the liturgy sometimes puts it, “before the whole company of heaven and you [the priest].” The priest is there to listen, to offer advice and counsel, and to speak the words of forgiveness that God promises all those who truly repent. The priest, within the context of the Liturgy of Reconciliation, is also bound by the ‘Seal of the Confessional’, i.e. not to reveal to anyone what is said by the penitent. The reason that this opportunity exists is to give the penitent the opportunity to speak aloud the thing that is on their mind before God and the priest, in confidence, secure in the knowledge that it won’t go further without their permission.

Naming the sin gives it a new level of reality and acknowledgement that mulling it in our own mind doesn’t. For some this might be the opportunity to confess something particular that has been on their heart and mind for many years. For others it might be the opportunity to seek to change a negative aspect of their life and character – drawing a line in the sand with the resolution to start afresh. The priest may also offer some advice or help the penitent to think things through a bit further (though it’s *definitely not* ‘therapy’). Most importantly, the priest is there to speak the words of absolution - that assurance of God’s forgiveness to the penitent. Naming aloud the reconciliation and restoration of relationship between God and the person confessing their sins. There might be a ‘penance’ – probably not a dozen ‘Hail Marys’ like the movies - pointing someone in the direction of a piece of scripture or a hymn that emphasises the nature of God’s love and forgiveness. The Prodigal Son from our Gospel reading is as good as any for this.

I hadn’t intended to spend a sermon de-bunking myths, but a couple of important ones for clarity:

The Seal of the Confessional is a literal seal and one that is still tolerated – even if not really tested - in law today. The *reality* is that priests don’t generally hear dramatic confessions of major crimes like they always seem to do in films. Were that to happen, a priest is well within their rights to ‘withhold absolution’ until the penitent presents themselves to a lawful authority. This is on the basis that the test of true repentance would be to give oneself up.

Confessions don’t have to happen in a confessional box. That’s helpful for some, and indeed for many it’s probably easiest not to make eye contact with the priest, but it can also be helpful for priests to offer to hear a confession in light of a pastoral conversation.

The most important things to bear in mind, however, is that there is *nothing* that we cannot bring before God in confession, who promises forgiveness to all who truly repent. Remember also that the priest is there to hear your confession and to minister to you, not to judge you. The final thing the priest says is "Go in peace and pray for me, a sinner." Our own sin is something we need to be attentive to as priests – indeed, a priest should not hear confessions themselves if they are not willing to make their own confession too. Another thing, perhaps to reassure you, is to mention the grace of 'priestly forgetfulness' - in which what we've heard in the confessional is left there and we don't go around with a knowing look next time we meet about what you confessed there.

If you wonder how God responds to us when we confess our sins, look again at the reaction to the Prodigal Son. There's extreme sadness when the Prodigal Son goes off and at the hurt this causes. But the remarkable thing in the story is the joy and celebration when he returns. The one that was lost has been found and this is the thing to be clung to and treasured.

As we also see in the parable, however, seeking reconciliation with God doesn't mean that we avoid justice in this world, nor does it guarantee reconciliation with others we may have wronged. We need to make good and pay for our wrongdoing where that's appropriate. Reconciliation with God, however, sets us back on the right path towards this once again, renewed and refreshed in our life with him so that we can deal with what life might throw at us.

So, in conclusion, don't write off the Sacrament of Reconciliation or dismiss it out of hand, because it's one of potential and hope. There is a phrase amongst some clergy regarding 'Confession': "All may. None must. Some *should*."

As someone who has been the one making the confession myself, I can attest to the feeling of freedom that it offers, even if it was deeply uncomfortable at the time. But, wherever you see yourself in that phrase, remember above all the love that God holds us in. This is a love that is far more willing to forgive us than we are to forgive ourselves or others. That same love that led Jesus to the Cross. That same love took away our sins. And that same love calls us to live in right relationship with him; to acknowledge our sins before him, but also to live in the love, light and joy of the forgiveness that he offers to us.

The Lord has put away your sins. Go in peace and pray for me, a sinner.  
**Amen.**

# Baptism

*Fr Nick*

Heavenly Father,  
by the power of your Holy Spirit  
you give your faithful people new life in the water of baptism.  
Guide and strengthen us by the same Spirit,  
that we who are born again may serve you in faith and love,  
and grow into the full stature of your Son, Jesus Christ,  
who is alive and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit  
now and for ever.

**Amen.**

*Readings: Romans 6.3-11 & Mark 1.9-13*

Along with other bits and pieces at home, items like my birth certificate and passport, I also possess a highly decorative card. It is oblong in shape, printed with a somewhat saccharine depiction of Jesus amongst a crowd of children, and serves as a record of my baptism. It notes the names of my parents, godparents, the minister who conducted the service, along with the date of the event and name of the church. Sadly, like so many other places of worship, the nineteenth-century church, where I was baptised or christened, once famous for its open-air pulpit, no longer survives; it has since been transformed into several flats. Similarly, my parents and godparents are no longer here, and yet my certificate of baptism has survived. It is now kept with all my important papers, ones that are tied up with my own, individual, personal identity.

I, like many of you, was baptised as a babe-in-arms, and, not surprisingly, have no memory of it at all. Others are baptised as adults, and so the memory of that significant moment resonates for the rest of their lives. Jesus himself was baptised as an adult. Many scholars believe this took place when he was around thirty years old, just before he embarked on his earthly ministry proper. This momentous event is narrated in our gospel reading for today, written by Mark, which notes that John did the baptizing. This most likely involved full immersion because we are told that Jesus came up out of the water.

There are number of things to mention here. If we read about John's message earlier in the gospel, we know that the act of baptism is related to repentance and the cleansing of sin. The pouring of water over an individual is a symbolic 'cleansing' act, but one that means much more. Water signified a great deal in the ancient world, just as it does in many

parts of the world today; it was (and is) connected with religious devotions. In Judaism, the High Priest could only enter the 'Holy of Holies' in the Jerusalem Temple after his ablutions. In Islam today, worshippers must wash before praying in the mosque. For Christians, therefore, the water is used for cleansing the individual but at a very deep level, not just on the surface.

The act of baptism also marks the start of a new life in the Christian faith, one which is Trinitarian in nature. We read again in Mark's gospel that when Jesus emerged from the water, the Spirit descended "like a dove on him" and a voice came from heaven saying, "You are my Son, Beloved; with you I am well pleased." Basically, we see here a description of the Trinity as Father, Son and Holy Spirit. When a child or adult is baptised today, it is done so in the name of the Trinity. Remember, too, that Jesus' baptism was a public event. John attracted numerous people by his call to repentance and cleansing, and it is likely that many were present the day Jesus made his way to the Jordan. To be baptised in front of others, just as today, signals that an individual has joined the church publicly, and, in the case of adults, has made a deliberate choice to profess the Christian faith. It is also the start of a new life in more ways than one. Following his baptism, Jesus was then driven into the wilderness by the Spirit. Baptism likewise marks the start of an individual's new life in Christ, and that means a life of ministry in all its different forms.

If we consider our first reading from the Epistle to the Romans, we see that St Paul describes baptism at a very deep level. Through the act of baptism, we are joined to Christ himself; in some mysterious way, we have joined him in his death, and born to a new life. In other words, our old self has gone, and a new one born again in Christ. This is the newness of new creation, brought to us through the death and resurrection of Jesus. In some churches, the one to be baptised is anointed with the cross on the forehead, often with holy oil, which is a mark of the individual being called to Christ, becoming a member of the Christian family, and so to a life of witness and service.

The sacrament of baptism, and its theology, has evolved and adapted over many centuries, with different churches doing different things. However, the common factor in each is that baptism marks the start of a new life in Christ, and in his church. Increasingly, it is common to hold baptisms alongside confirmations on Easter day, which makes truly clear that relationship between the individual's dying to sin and transition to new life. This is a symbol of the death and resurrection of Christ. This is the newness of new creation. **Amen.**

# Confirmation

*Fr Chris*

God, who as at this time  
taught the hearts of your faithful people  
by sending to them the light of your Holy Spirit:  
grant us by the same Spirit  
to have a right judgement in all things  
and evermore to rejoice in his holy comfort;  
through the merits of Christ Jesus our Saviour,  
who is alive and reigns with you,  
in the unity of the Holy Spirit,  
one God, now and for ever.

**Amen.**

*Readings: Romans 8.1-11 & Matthew 5.1-11*

At the heart of the sacrament of confirmation sits the idea of anointing and imbuing candidates with the Holy Spirit, to equip them for the work of their Christian ministry (remember, 'ministry' is a broad term!) and God's calling upon their lives. And, in spite of what I'm about to say, it's important that we bear that in mind above all things.

Yet, the sacrament of confirmation has sometimes been described as 'a sacrament in want of a theology'. It's not an entirely fair description, but within the life of the Church, confirmation has been embraced, ignored, adapted and generally misunderstood down the years. In a number of ways, it's a bit of a mishmash of understanding!

Down the years it's been used as a means of 'initiation' into the church, as a 'rite of passage', as a means of instructing and testing children in the tenets of the faith and the means by which someone is admitted to receive Communion. Most simply it's a sign of God's grace and our relationship with the wider church. As a priest, it's deeply rewarding to prepare and present people for Confirmation and I hope that it's a memorable and wonderful event for those who are Confirmed, as they affirm, and often take on for themselves, the promises of their baptism and take their place within the life of the wider church, as they seek to live out their faith.

But how did we get to the situation where we are?

In the Early Church, baptism was administered by the bishop, often at Easter. This would have been preceded by a significant period of

preparation - a 'catechumenate' (a 'catechumen' being "one who is instructed"). As the church grew numerically and geographically, the bishop was unable to preside over all the baptisms, so had to delegate the responsibility to priests who were more locally based, with the bishop visiting later to 'confirm' what had been effected by the priest with the laying on of hands and anointing with oil. The bishop in doing this sought to be the chief minister of initiation and a focal point of unity within the life of the church, something which continues to this day in some ways. The bit unmentioned at this point is that baptism and confirmation could be administered whilst a child was still very young, possibly even an infant - i.e. very different from what we now know and understand as 'confirmation', at least in the 'western' church.

A little snippet of trivia is that it was not unheard of by the middle-ages for bishops in Europe to confirm on horseback, with parents holding their children up for the laying on of hands from the saddle. St Hugh of Lincoln was treasured, apparently, for getting off his horse and moving among the people to confirm.

By mediaeval times, there was a considered age of around 7 as a minimum for confirmation. By the time of the Reformation, there was a growing call for people to be able to understand and profess their faith in order to be confirmed. The Catechism took on a greater importance and the bishop was expected to inspect and examine candidates in their catechism prior to confirmation. For some reading or hearing this sermon, that might even have been your experience, because it was an aspect that carried on well into the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

In the present day, there's still an expectation of instruction in the faith and there's the expectation of a bishop to minister the sacrament (within the Church of England, at least). But the understanding behind it is a bit convoluted and muddled, as is the diversity of practice.

I'm not sure I want to spend much of the sermon trying to unpick those knots, because we'd be here until Compline and there are blogs to read or a longer conversation to have about it. Instead, I want to draw out some of the themes because for most of us, confirmation is an event that has *happened* and hopefully we can still remember it.

Whatever we might think of it, Confirmation is a rite of passage within the life of the Christian faith. For all who are confirmed, it's a public affirmation of the faith that we hold in God. Because it's a sacrament administered by



a bishop, it's also a rite that should also remind us of our place within the life of the wider diocese and the wider church.

For many, it has been the means by which we prepare to receive communion for the first time. Thinking has changed about this quite a lot in recent years, and at St Thomas' a few years ago we embraced that change by admitting children to communion prior to confirmation. This wasn't to devalue confirmation, but rather to increase its value, along with the value we should place on our baptism – which is sometimes said to be the sacrament on which all the others are built and the vantage point from which we receive them.

The Eucharist isn't a reward for learning, attendance or good behaviour but rather a means of grace and developing relationship with God. The problem with linking first communion and confirmation so directly is that it can also turn confirmation into a production line or a hoop that one must jump through, rather than a rich sacramental experience that one can engage with and take 'ownership' of one's faith.

I've spoken before of my experience of being confirmed at the age of ten, as much as anything so I could receive communion, which in hindsight rather reduced the significance and symbolism of the sacrament of confirmation. I fully accept, however, that others' experiences will vary. In my ordained ministry, thus far, the candidates I've prepared for confirmation have tended to be older and it's been particularly enriching to engage with people as they look at their faith from a more mature perspective, rather than jumping through a hoop set by the vicar.

Baptism and Confirmation are inextricably linked and in the context of a confirmation, the candidate's baptism is recalled and the vows made are renewed, especially if the candidate was baptised as a child, claiming as their own that faith that they've now learned more about and wish to take forward into their life.

At the moment of Confirmation, the bishop anoints the candidate with the sign of the Cross in Chrism Oil, a fragrant oil that represents the overflowing blessings of the Holy Spirit, and speaks directly to the candidate, saying,

"God has called you by name and made you his own."

Then lays on hands and prays,

“Confirm, O Lord, your servant with your Holy Spirit.”

Laying on of hands as someone marks a new stage in their journey of faith is something we see in the Acts of the Apostles and then into the Early Church. It’s a very powerful and profound gesture and one that has been deemed as essential throughout the ages, in spite of other theological queries and even times of Covid (postponement of the Confirmation was the only option, rather than omitting the laying on of hands or finding a way around it!). And, just as the disciples were called and sent out by Jesus and so on through the ages, we too are sent out in God’s service – again, a close parallel with baptism.

The congregation joins with the bishop in praying,  
*“Defend, O Lord,  
these your servants with your heavenly grace,  
that they may continue yours for ever,  
and daily increase in your Holy Spirit more and more  
until they come to your everlasting kingdom.”*

Our confirmation shouldn’t so much be about achieving a tick in a box as a marker in our journey of faith and the means by which we continue to grow in knowledge and love of God throughout our lives. It’s a one-off event, like our baptism, but still an important one that underpins our Christian identity. I’d also gently point out that just because you might have learnt a lot at your confirmation class, doesn’t mean that’s the end of the road for learning about God, Christian Faith and the Church – yes, those are three different things, even though they’re very closely related.

The disciples spent that time before Pentecost waiting for the promised Holy Spirit to be poured out upon them, then they never looked back. It was a once in a lifetime experience for them too, but one that sustained them throughout the trials and difficulties of their lives and ministries, in many and diverse ways.

So, some questions for you:

- \* What do you recall from your own Confirmation?
- \* How did it speak to you then and how might it speak to you today?
- \* Were there some good habits and helpful tips that you learned then but have forgotten or let slip? How might you bring those back or adapt them for where you’re at today?

Above all, how might you hold fast to that idea that God has called *you* by name and made you his own? Because, in amongst the stresses, strains and temptations of life that follow our confirmation, however many years ago, with the Holy Spirit's guiding, that knowledge is something that we can fall back on and rely upon. **Amen.**

## **Marriage**

*Fr Chris*

God our Father,  
through the gentle flame of the Spirit,  
Christ has come to make his home with us,  
to warm our hearts and make his presence known to others.  
May the sacrament of marriage  
be a reminder of how we are called to live,  
filled with joy and holiness,  
and delighting in all that Christ has taught us;  
in whose name we make our prayer.

**Amen.**

*Readings: Genesis 1.26-28 & John 2.1-11.*

Marriage is something that raises a range of different thoughts and opinions in the present age, as it has perhaps done through time. For many people reading or hearing this, I hope the thoughts are generally positive – even if you spent much of yesterday in the shed, just for a bit of peace and quiet. For others, the mention of marriage is now a matter of memory, whether through bereavement or separation and divorce. For others still, marriage is something that is engaged in by others, and that suits me nicely, thank you very much. There are as many different perspectives across society, cultures, generations and even the Church.

In some parts of the church, Marriage is seen officially as a 'sacrament', an outward and visible sign of an inward and spiritual grace. In other parts, it's something to be affirmed and promoted, and a way of calling God's blessing upon a relationship. The *Book of Common Prayer* considered it to have 3 main purposes, following the thinking of St Augustine in the 4<sup>th</sup> century, namely:

1. The procreation of children.
2. The 'remedy for sin' i.e. the avoidance of giving into lust outside of marriage.

3. Mutual society, help and comfort. i.e. companionship and care for one another.

Whilst for many these three criteria are not unreasonable, it feels a somewhat clinical appraisal of something far more wonderful!

There's also the implicit reflection within the Prayer Book marriage service of the wider view in society that the bride became a 'chattel' of the groom, i.e. a possession. Think also of the political bartering and brokering that often took place in relation to the marriage of princesses and other members of the nobility until comparatively recently. It's little wonder that marriage isn't always as positively viewed now as it might be.

In more recent decades, the question has also arisen of whether marriage is solely between a man and a woman, or whether it's something that can be entered into partners of the same gender. The State has decreed, in this country at least, this is possible. The Church remains, officially at least, unconvinced of this - though the discussions are far from over.

We could spend a long time unpacking all of these things, but actually what would be more helpful is to look at the sacrament of marriage with a wider viewpoint. This might perhaps help our thinking and exploration, however we view marriage.

One comment that often comes up in relation to marriage is the idea of a 'biblical' marriage. That's not, perhaps as straightforward as it seems, especially when one quickly brings to mind the story of David, Michal, and Bathsheba; Jacob or Solomon and their many wives etc. The assumption of mutual exclusivity and fidelity to one spouse is in place by the time of Jesus, however, and that forms his frame of reference when teaching. Indeed, he reserves some of his hardest words for those who are unfaithful or do not look after their spouse as they should, especially where they seek their own wellbeing over and above the other's. Those themes are also taken up by other writers in the New Testament, including St Paul and the writer of Revelation (more on that in a moment).

The Wedding at Cana forms the setting for Our Lord's first miracle. (If ever you doubt in the concept of prayer to Our Lady, remember it was she that petitioned him firmly to oblige...). More seriously, the overarching theme of the Wedding at Cana is one of abundance and joy. Jesus provides a symbol of the grace and generosity of God in this literal and figurative outpouring at this scene of celebration and joy. We never

find out who this couple are, but it's fair to say that they were blessed and preserved by God from the social shame that would have accompanied the lack of wine.

Returning to the writer of Revelation, the theme of marriage – especially the wedding banquet of the Lamb is a recurring theme. The Groom being Jesus, who is united to his Bride, The Church. The image relates to the union of Christ and his Church, something that we should seek to attain to, through faithfulness to his teaching and devotion to him. The Church on earth has not been as faithful to that calling as it should have been down the ages and the relationship between Christ and his Church has often been one-sided. That doesn't alter the call, however.

At the heart of this relationship, however, stands a covenant – a binding promise between God and his people that he will be with them wherever they go. Supremely, we're reminded of this covenant in the sacrament of the Eucharist as we recall and share in Christ's saving work upon the Cross – the New Covenant. A covenant that had to be renewed and re-established by God after humanity drifted away from him.

It's also the idea of covenant that shapes our contemporary understanding of marriage. Marriage isn't 'just' a legal arrangement – it's not just a contract. Marriage at its fullest requires two people to commit to one another in heart, body and soul, and where that covenant falls down, it needs to be addressed.

But covenants can be broken and covenants can be renewed. The Old Testament contains a number of examples of God creating and renewing covenants with his people, even to the extent of the New Covenant of the Cross. It's some of this covenantal thinking that shapes thinking regarding re-marriage of divorcees in church.

Our Genesis reading reminds us of some of God's plans for creation. For some, being alone is ok – for some it appears to work best... But, in Eden, God observes that it was not good for the man to be alone, so he creates a helpmate of equal standing to support and accompany him. History and Christian teaching down the ages have skewed this somewhat down the ages, with a systemic inequality between spouses perpetuated by the church and society.

Thinking back to the earlier reference to the about property and chattels, the couple actually belong to *one another* and share their possessions

too. The marriage service makes this clear: "all that I am, I give to you, and all that I have, I share with you."

If we seek to identify what it is that marriage reflects, what things might we pick out?

A stable base for family life – whatever form that takes. Increasingly we see that 'family' takes many different forms – not just the 2.4 children model. It has probably always taken many forms down the ages, but perhaps it's a more openly acknowledged thing now - and for the better. There's also the mutual support and comfort. Just as with the man and woman in Eden, so too with others in our own time.

But how do we see the relationship between Christ and his Church reflected in marriage? The modern marriage service speaks of marriage being given "that as man and woman grow together in love and trust, they shall be united with one another in heart, body and mind, as Christ is united with his bride, the Church." If, as the church of the present age, we want to continue to talk about the 'sanctity of marriage', what are the sacred and sanctified things that we need to consider, model and point to as a Church? How does our life together speak of the sacramental relationship that we seek to have with God? How, as Christians, as Christ's church, do we model that faithfulness of heart and mind? That giving of ourselves to Christ? How do we model the love that should give freely of itself in as a Church and in our own lives?

The modern marriage service also prays that marriage for the couple may be "a seal upon their hearts and a crown upon their heads" and that at their lives' end they may share in the eternal wedding banquet. May that banquet be as plenteous as Cana (and more so). For now, however imperfectly it may do it, may the Church on earth, and those who are joined together in marriage, reflect that plenteousness and self-giving love to the world around it. We pray too that all our human relationships might speak more fully of the hope, joy, richness, and perfection that we will one day enjoy in God's presence. **Amen.**

## Ordination

*Fr Nick*

God our Father, Lord of all the world,  
through your Son you have called us into the fellowship  
of your universal Church:  
hear our prayer for your faithful people  
that in their vocation and ministry  
each may be an instrument of your love,  
and give to your servants the needful gifts of grace;  
through our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ,  
who is alive and reigns with you,  
in the unity of the Holy Spirit,  
one God, now and for ever.

**Amen.**

*Readings: Ephesians 4.7-16 & John 20.19-23*

Last September, I was ordained a deacon. It was a rather odd ceremony, given that the Coronavirus pandemic was still ongoing, and so the numbers of those present had to be reduced. Hand sanitiser was being doled out left, right and centre! Nevertheless, Bishop Guli was still able to lay hands upon me and call on the Holy Spirit to equip me for the office and work of a deacon in the Church. Such services are ones for celebration, when friends and family gather, often followed with fizzy wine and a slice of cake. The tone of my ordination was quite different. Leicester Cathedral was not full of people and there was a distinct lack of sparkling grape juice. This did not worry me because it highlighted what my ordination was all about. Was it the parties, social gatherings and so forth? No. Ordination is a deeply serious, and spiritual matter.

So, what is the sacrament of ordination? It should be stated from the outset that we are all called by God to exercise ministry in the church. Each of us has gifts and abilities given by God, which are to be used for his glory. If we look at our first reading from the epistle to the Ephesians, Paul speaks of the church in terms of a 'body'; at its head is Christ but the body's individual parts, such as the limbs and so forth, all have a part to play. Paul also describes the different roles in that body, like evangelists, teachers and so on. If you take a good look at the church, the faithful are moved to different areas of ministry. It may be a pastoral one, where visits are made to people's homes. It may be one focused on providing a welcome and hospitality in the church. We all have a part to play in the work of Christian communities.

Some are called to specific vocations. If you look at the Old Testament, you can see particular people called by God to do certain things. For instance, there were the prophets, who received visions and messages from God and communicated them to his people; and there were sages, who reflected upon God's ways in the universe and communicated their thoughts through their writings, now described as Wisdom literature, like the Book of Proverbs.

If we consider the New Testament, Jesus called people to carry out certain roles. These were people he could teach and instruct to prepare them for future ministry. Jesus called twelve disciples, sent them out to heal and to teach, and he instructed them to make disciples and baptise others in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. After Jesus' death, the disciples commissioned others to continue with this work. St Paul himself was called directly by the risen Lord to a life dedicated to mission and teaching. And so, it has been ever since. The sacrament of ordination, therefore, confers authority on the person to preach the word of God, to consecrate and offer the sacrament of the body and blood of Christ, to minister to the sick, prepare the dying for death, to declare absolution and to bless in God's name. Although both are ordained, the roles of priest and deacon differ.

During the ordination service, the bishop calls on the Holy Spirit to act in the one who is being ordained. A prayer asks the Spirit to equip them with the gifts necessary for their specific ministry. This act echoes the description in our gospel reading from John. We read that Jesus appeared to his followers in the locked, upper room, and he breathed on them. This may sound a little odd, but Jesus was imparting the Holy Spirit upon them, to give them authority to do that which he called them to do. Here, Jesus tells them to forgive sins; the disciples are to follow his instruction. The significance of the Spirit, then as now, is central to ordination. The laying on of a bishop's hands is a clear, physical act, and yet there is much more going on here than meets the eye.

We recognise that ordination is a sacrament, but is it merely something that helps a person to *do* something? Does ordination help a person to be good, functionally? It is true that we pray for the Spirit to give the ordained person the gifts that he or she needs. Yet, many in the church also believe, as do I, that the act of ordination affects the individual profoundly. To be a priest is not just a case of *doing* but a case of *being*. And as we think about all the sacraments, they affect us, spiritually one way or another, whether we are conscious of it at first or only many years later. What God does to us inwardly, symbolised by the physical act, can be, quite literally, life-changing and life-enhancing. **Amen.**