

Monday

Baptism and Confirmation

The reflections this week are offered by the Rev'd Dominic Holroyd-Thomas...

The Church is divided on many matters, and one such topic is the sacraments. Are there two or are there seven? What even is a sacrament? This week we will be (loosely) following Andrew Davison's book *Why Sacraments?*, thinking each day about a different sacrament and its place in Christian worship and ritual.

The Catechism in the 1662 Prayer Book asks 'How many Sacraments hath Christ ordained in his Church?' The answer, we are told, is, 'Two only, as generally necessary to salvation, that is to say, Baptism, and the Supper of the Lord.' And salvation is a good reason for singling these two sacraments out, for the sacraments are about nothing less than salvation.

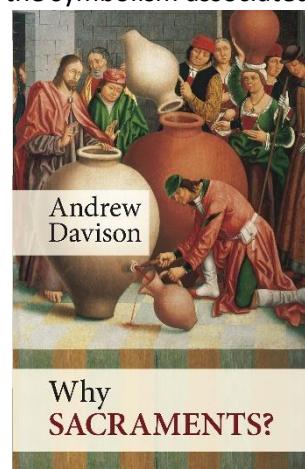
We perhaps rightly begin with baptism – the gateway sacrament; it's something most people will have at least some experience of. You may be baptised yourself; you may have been to a baptism; you may even be a Godparent. When we think of baptism we might think of water symbolising the cleansing of the candidate and their putting on of Christ, or a candle symbolising the passing on of the light of Christ, the light of faith, to the newly baptised. It is difficult to avoid the rich symbolism.

Baptism is a sharing in the death of Christ, but it also, perhaps more importantly, about sharing in his resurrection. It has been said that 'baptism is an Easter sacrament whenever it is celebrated'. It is why the paschal (Easter) candle is lit – the same candle that is then lit at a funeral. The sacrament of baptism is a reminder that we are all known, named, and loved by God, and in the waters of baptism we are enfolded in the tender and merciful arms of God.

Whilst baptism is the 'gateway' sacrament, another initiation sacrament is confirmation – something we hope and pray all those who are baptised – particularly at a young age – will come to later in life and reaffirm for themselves the baptism promises previously made on their behalf. Confirmation is usually carried out by a bishop, however in the Roman Catholic Church some priests confirm – but even in the Roman Church there is disagreement as to whether this is a full and proper confirmation.

Davison writes that each sacrament is the domain of the Holy Spirit, but that this is particularly stressed in confirmation which is built around a prayer that God would 'confirm' the candidate 'with the Holy Spirit'. The candidate receives the laying on of hands and is anointed with the oil of chrism. It is, in a sense, the sacrament of maturity – the baptism promises made on our behalf we now 'confirm' ourselves.

I wonder how you live out your baptismal promises each day? What does the symbolism associated with baptism and confirmation signify for you?



Tuesday

The Eucharist

Augustine, in his *Confessions*, had Christ saying ‘I am the food of the fully grown’. In the Eucharist (otherwise known as Mass, the Lord’s Supper and Holy Communion) Christ comes to be with us in the simple gifts of bread and wine which, by the mystery of prayer, become the body and blood of Christ.

I wonder where you eat your meals in your home? Chances are, if not for every meal, you will gather at a table. For many people this is often a very special part of the day, a time when the whole household gathers together and gives thanks for the day that has been. Similarly, the Eucharist is celebrated on an altar (a special table) and this is often the focal point of any church for it is the place where the people (the body) gather and are fed. Eucharist simply means ‘thanksgiving’, and it is at this special meal that the priest and the people give thanks to God and re-enact Jesus’ sacrifice.

The Eucharist was instituted by Christ himself at the Last Supper. We recall this on Maundy Thursday when we remember that moment Jesus told his disciples to continue this ritual in remembrance of him. We read of this in scripture:

‘While they were eating, Jesus took a loaf of bread, and after blessing it he broke it, gave it to the disciples, and said, “Take, eat; this is my body.” Then he took a cup, and after giving thanks he gave it to them, saying, “Drink from it, all of you; for this is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins.’

Similarly to baptism, the Eucharist is a sacrament of the body and incorporates us into the body of Christ. It breaks down the barriers of our humanity and brings us together with our fellow Christians. So often in our lives we find ourselves segregated from one another, whether that be by age, marital status or skin colour, and our gathering round the altar to receive communion is a great leveller, reminding us of our shared humanity and worthiness in the eyes of God.

Davison writes ‘as with baptism, the meaning of the Eucharist unfolds in terms of the pattern set in the Incarnation. In the Eucharist, as in his earthly life, Christ comes to be with us and, through his presence, to unite us to God and to one another.’

We pray for the Church to be united, and for all to be made welcome at the altar where we gather with Christ and receive him into our hearts.



Wednesday

Ordination

To be a deacon, priest or bishop, one has to be ordained, and ordination is simply the sacrament of ‘order’: it appreciates the importance of good leadership in the Church.

When I was ordained, first as deacon in 2017 and then as priest in 2018, many friends and family who gathered with me in St Albans Cathedral had not been to an ordination before. Unlike a wedding or baptism which many people will have been to, ordinations are unfamiliar.

The ordering of the Church’s ministry has been shaped under the guidance of the Holy Spirit through the processes of human history, and the Church of England has maintained the threefold order of bishop, priest and deacon.

Bishops are ordained in historic (apostolic) succession. This is a sign of the Church’s care for continuity in the whole of its life and mission, and reinforces its determination to manifest the abiding characteristics of the Church of the apostles.

Priests are called to be servants and shepherds, to teach and to admonish, to baptise and preside at the altar. The ministry of deacons is focussed on being heralds of the kingdom and in bringing before the servant Church the needs of the world.

The Church’s ordained ministry is catholic, that is, universal in time and space. The Church of England speaks of ordination to the office and work of bishop, priest or deacon in the Church of God. When an ordained priest presides at the Eucharist and at Baptism, pronounces God’s absolution and blesses God’s people in his name, and when bishops confirm and ordain in a particular place, these are actions not only of a particular local Christian community, but of the whole Church.

This is not to say that those who are not ordained do not have a calling: each and every one of us has a calling and vocation, but ordination is the setting apart of someone into a formal and historic ordering of Christ’s Church.

What do you think God is calling you to do? Where do you see God at work in your life?



Thursday

Marriage

According to John's Gospel, Jesus' first miracle was performed at a wedding. Perhaps one of the most well-known (or hoped for) miracles was that of Jesus turning water into wine. We read in scripture: 'Jesus said to them, "Fill the jars with water." And they filled them up to the brim. He said to them, "Now draw some out, and take it to the chief steward." So they took it. When the steward tasted the water that had become wine, and did not know where it came from... the steward called the bridegroom and said to him, "Everyone serves the good wine first, and then the inferior wine after the guests have become drunk. But you have kept the good wine until now."

This was not simply Jesus encouraging drunkenness and debauchery, it was a very deliberate sign. The setting of a wedding underlines that Jesus came to bring joy and fullness of life, not just to the wedding guests at Cana, but to that greater marriage, a marriage in which Jesus was the bridegroom and the Church was his bride. This is often said in the Preface at the beginning of a wedding service: '[the couple] shall be united in that love as Christ is united with [his bride the] Church.' And this wedding imagery continues throughout the bible, culminating in Revelation with a vision of the 'wedding feast of the Lamb.'

But what constitutes marriage as a sacrament? In Ephesians, marriage is called a 'mystery' (it is still referred to as a 'holy mystery' in the CoE marriage service) and the Greek for mystery, *mysterion*, is later employed to mean 'sacrament', although, as I mentioned on Monday, the Reformers were not enthusiastic about giving the title 'sacrament' to anything but baptism and the Eucharist. So we can be in no doubt that marriage is a sacrament, since the joining together of two people is a mystery: firstly the love two people share, and secondly, their human love which points to a much higher love, God's love, and marriage is an expression of that love.

But what does this mean for those who are single, or are unable to get married in church because of their sexuality? It is not uncommon in some traditions to encounter such an emphasis on marriage, sometimes reaching an almost hysterical pitch, and this can be painful for those who do not feel called to marriage, or who, by virtue of who they love, are unable to celebrate a sacramental marriage with their partner. On the topic of singleness, it is worth remembering Paul's words in 1 Corinthians: 'he who marries his fiancée does well; and he who refrains from marriage will do better.' This is on the basis that the unmarried person can devote more of their life to the cause of the gospel.

Society puts such emphasis on marriage, which is rightly so, but this pressure can sometimes be difficult for those who, for whatever reason, will never have a relationship blessed by the Church.



Friday

Anointing

As a priest, one of the most privileged moments is anointing someone on their death bed. In the moment of anointing someone with holy oil, God heals. Of course, I do not expect a *physical* healing (although one must not be so pessimistic as to God's ability to perform miracles) but a spiritual healing; a moment of encounter and blessing.

Anointing (otherwise known as unction or extreme unction) in this sense is reserved for the anointing of the sick, however there are traditionally three holy oils: the oil of the sick, the oil of the catechumens and the oil of chrism. Catechumens is used to anoint prior to baptism and the oil of chrism is used to anoint kings, priests and the newly confirmed.

The use of oil (usually olive oil) to anoint the sick was part of ordinary, non-religious, medical procedure in ancient times and occurs frequently in both the Hebrew scriptures and the New Testament. For example, in the story of the Good Samaritan we read 'But a Samaritan while traveling came near him; and when he saw him, he was moved with pity. He went to him and bandaged his wounds, having poured oil and wine on them.' (Luke 10: 33-34)

But there are two passages in the New Testament which specifically refer to the sacramental use of oil as an 'acted prayer' for God's healing to be made known. Firstly in Mark: 'They cast out many demons, and anointed with oil many who were sick and cured them.' (Mark 6: 13), and secondly in the Letter of James: 'Are any among you sick? They should call for the elders of the church and have them pray over them, anointing them with oil in the name of the Lord. The prayer of faith will save the sick, and the Lord will raise them up; and anyone who has committed sins will be forgiven.' (James 5: 14-15) It is worth noting the linking between sickness and evil/demonic powers in Mark and the link between sickness and sin in James. Healing with oil was – and to an extent still is – seen as an effective fight back against the evil powers gripping humanity.

Until Vatican II, and its subsequent influence on Anglican practice, anointing the sick was usually reserved for cases of life-threatening illness. This is partly because the Greek word for 'sick' in the passage from James above can also mean 'dead'! However, since Vatican II, anointing has come to be used much more widely in cases of less serious illness (at St Mary's in Welwyn there is a service of healing during Lent and Advent). Healing is now understood in a much wider sense than purely physical or medical.

We all need healing. Let us pray for God to come to us, heal our wounds, and bring us to fullness of life.



Saturday

Confession

Confession, for some Anglicans and Protestants, is perhaps an overly ‘Catholic’ word which conjures up images of confession boxes dotted at the side of Roman Catholic churches. Ironically, since Vatican II, most Roman Catholic churches have ditched the traditional anonymous confessional with preference for a less formal conversation and counsel.

Confession deals with the fact that after baptism, we sin, and there is nothing remotely Catholic or difficult to understand about that. ‘If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves.’ (1 John 1: 8)

In his ministry, Christ travelled from town to town with a simple message: ‘Repent, for the kingdom of God is at hand.’ His message is a template for the Church. Preaching repentance and fostering reconciliation forms a vital part of what it means for the Church to continue the work of the Incarnation. We think of the many Christians who over the years who have devoted their entire lives to the reconciliation of communities and people; people such as Archbishop Desmond Tutu who headed up South Africa’s Truth and Reconciliation Commission.

Confession is a thoroughly realistic sacrament, not launching us on something new but restoring us to newness when we fail, for, as the Prayer Book puts it, ‘we cannot always stand upright’. Baptism is the primary sacrament of forgiveness (the sacrament of all sacraments, in fact) and confession always takes second place to baptism since it renews baptism’s effect.

Confession, whether it be in an anonymous confession box in Westminster Cathedral, or talking things over with your priest in a pub, is one of the most profound ways in which we can take the Christian moral life seriously. It is an opportunity to take stock of where we stand, to reach out urgently to God for grace to use aright the time that is left to us here on earth, and to continue being formed into the likeness of Christ, who himself was the sinless and spotless Lamb.

