

Protected by an Embrace

God is as accessible as our next chat over a cup of coffee

During these days of new life, while noticing and being aware of all that is happening around me, memories of the past also surface and stir my heart. Here is one I would like to share with you. It happened in May some years ago. Easter was well and truly over and Pentecost was beckoning. Tired after Monday's meetings, I checked the answerphone. It was a woman's voice: 'Sir, I would like to have my baby christened next Sunday.' I tensed. She didn't even know my name. Neither was she aware of our 'two months' notice' requirement or the need for the prebaptismal preparations. I fumed like this for a while before ringing back. 'Look,' I said, 'it's not as easy as you think. Can you come round next week so I can fill you in on a few matters?' 'No,' she replied, 'you'd better come round here!'

I did. I came to her house with my shield and spear at the ready. I was in indignant mode. After all, rules are rules. There are diocesan regulations to be honoured; we cannot just go around, as we used to, baptising everything that moved. It is due to such mistakes in the past that only a fraction of Catholics practise their faith now. The young mother's face was discoloured. She told me that she was just out of hospital after a bad beating at the hands of her boyfriend. There was a sadness in her voice. Looking into the small cot with great love, and a sudden smile, she said, 'I do not want what happened to me, ever to happen to my baby. I feel she would be safe with your people.' We talked for a while. My heart melted. I promised to do what she wanted, to make it all as easy as possible for her, to protect her little daughter from whatever threatened her fragile presence in a precarious world.



Another priest told me a similar story. When he, also slightly affronted by a brusque phone call, went round to the house, the mother explained to him that she had fought tooth and nail to bring her child to full term, in spite of the pressures and threats of her boyfriend, and even of her own Catholic family, to have an abortion. We both compared notes about how suddenly our attitudes and approaches had changed. How ashamed we felt at our self-righteousness and ego-hurt. How far we had drifted from the compassion of Jesus! Such experiences in my life have led me to try a different way of looking at our role as pastoral, non-judgemental servants of God's people. Especially now as we move through Pope Francis' 'Year of Mercy', trying to live out more faithfully in our daily lives, the tenderness of God.

Are we still placing burdens on their shoulders? Are we still expecting them to dance to our tune, to jump through all kinds of ecclesiastical hoops before they can be worthy of joining us? Our parish preparation programmes are, of course, good and necessary. But they are only one way into the family. John Shea suggests that Jesus was crucified because 'He made God as accessible as the village well'.



Towards the end of the celebration of baptism one of the ritual prayers has an ambiguous phrase, 'Now you are a child of God.' Every Sunday I explain to the adults its true meaning. From the very first moment of its life, and long before it is brought to church, the baby is already made in God's image. 'Here comes God again!' the mystics would exclaim at the arrival of every new baby.

Maybe there is never another time in its life when it is closer to its Creator than now. And maybe the whole point of baptism is to keep it that way; to protect the little one not just from its own potential for sinning, but also from 'the sin of the world' that is waiting to destroy its lovely soul.

I reflected much on that young mother's remark the day I called to talk about a baptism for her precious baby. There was a pleading in her eyes as she said, 'I feel she would be safe with your people.' Maybe she

had got it right and that this is the true theology of baptism. Maybe the baby is in reasonably good shape on arrival, but then the people of Jesus gather round it to keep it safe from the unfriendly fire of a world that can no longer distinguish enemy from friend.

Baptism is such an exciting sacrament. It is about one of the most intimate moments in a family's life, and yet it has, too, the cosmic reverberations of the universal implications of the first Easter. The finest and most elemental symbols in the world are used with abandon, and the words and titles addressed to the child are spilling over with almost unbelievable wonder and delight. Not so long ago, just as my thumb touched the newborn's forehead to 'claim her for Christ,' the most beautiful smile spread across her sleepy features. It seemed to me as though that little heart was rejoicing for having found the completion it came to search for! Here is the magic of God in the magic of a baby. Here is infinite power in the vulnerability of a small child. Here is the divine essence in the dynamic fragility of a tiny frame. Baptism is Christmas, Passover and Pentecost rolled into one. This kind of ritual lifts us into another realm of being. It turns the world on its head.



A dribbling baby is designated as the temple of the Holy Spirit.

A very defenceless human being, who can neither read nor talk, is called a divine priestess, a prophetess and a princess. The earthiness of the incarnation is in the celebration of baptism. The smearing with oil is sensuous and perfumed; the baby is wrapped in the white garment of God's love like the warm towel after a bath near the fire; the candle of light is the comforting embrace when fear chills our body and soul. And the truth of water, that old mother from whose womb we once emerged is still our guarantee of vibrant life.

I like to think of baptism as a kind of celebration of the senses. And I like to think of the senses as thresholds of the soul. There is a lovely moment in the baptismal ceremony when the priest touches the ear and mouth of the baby. He prays that she will never be destroyed by the poison of hate-filled talk. May the ears of her heart be ever allured by the music of God's present moment with its songs and stories. Touching her mouth, he prays that she will never use her gift of speech for anything but spreading love, encouragement, forgiveness and joy.

And this, after all, is more or less what that young mother in my opening story was asking for her baby. A frightened child calls out to his mother during a night of nightmares. She rushes into his room and tries to comfort her crying son. 'There is no danger,' she reassures him, 'there are no ghosts or dragons here. You are well protected by your guardian angels and by my prayers. In fact, God is here to keep you safe.' The child will not be consoled. All her efforts were in vain. 'Can't you see,' he pleaded, 'I want something with skin on.' And, of course, that is why God took a human body.

This memory has certainly not only warmed but also stirred my heart.

