

## BAPTISM AUGUST 2010

Twelve hundred years ago, there was a church here. It would have been very small, it probably would have been made from planks of wood or perhaps branches woven into each other and covered with clay and a thatched roof. Inside, it would not have looked that different, there would have been an altar and candles and a font. The priest would have baptised children and adults in the same way that we do today, nothing has changed.

The little village of Harborne, surrounded by fields has its earliest written mention in an entry in the Domesday Book of 1086. The spelling of Harborne has appeared with several variations through the centuries, and the derivation of the place name has often been disputed. One of the more probable suggestions is 'boundary brook', although 'high brow' and 'dirty brook' are also possibilities. I looked it up online and was thrilled to discover that among the people mentioned in the entry for Horebourne in 1086 is one Ralph. I knew I felt at home here.

However, before the time of the Domesday Book, Harborne was in the kingdom of Mercia and its neighbour to the south was the kingdom of Wessex. In 878, King Alfred the great was fighting the latest in a long series of campaigns against the Danes, particularly war-like Vikings and finally was starting to defeat them. At the treaty of Wedmore, now a tiny hamlet in the Somerset levels, the Danish leader was baptised and all of his followers with him, although the note in the Parker chronicle says there was no real profession of faith, it was a matter of convenience. It may have been, but to Alfred it was important and the result was peace.

We are used now, in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, to make decisions for ourselves. I could never understand how all of Gudrun's followers came to be baptised just because their leader was. Of course, they could because they did not see themselves as individuals in the same way that we do: what their leader decided, they did. So if their leader became a Christian they would all be Christians too. It was not a decision they needed to make, their opinion was not requested.

Some people worry that babies are baptised when their opinions on the subject is not asked. This morning we have four small children with us and very shortly I will be asking their parents to speak on their behalf. There are, of course, quite a lot of things when you are very small about which your opinion is not requested. Eating green vegetables. Having a bath. Going to bed. The name your parents give you. Naming your child is a gift to your child, it's a way of expressing that this child belongs to you and your family. Sometimes, parents give their child very odd names. But it's still a gift. It's one of the reasons you parents and also godparents, the people the parents of the child have chosen as a gift to their child, to care for their moral and spiritual welfare, speak for them today. It is an inheritance and a heritage. This is the way God thinks about us. The prophet Isaiah, the one who gives names to the Messiah that we hear every Christmas, tells us that God says *I have called you by name, you are mine.*

Part of the meaning of the baptism service is recognising this gift of God to us, that we are his and he cares for us. It is not something we have to ask for.

This baptism service is about a sense of belonging: to a family that you were born into and to the church community that witnesses the beginning of your life in the church as a child of God.

But, baptism doesn't necessarily make you a Christian. It's more like starting at school. The minute a child puts on their uniform and walks through the gate for the first time, they are a schoolboy or girl, but then all the learning starts and baptism is like that too: it's a beginning, a walking through the gate. That's why the font is at the door of the church. It's a start, a beginning, there's plenty of time for choice and decisions later. We are no longer in a little church built of wood and worried about the Vikings at the door.

When water is poured on the child and the name is given, we trust and hope that the Holy Spirit will bless the child, but it's not magic. God is doing the work, not us. In the same way that someone is part of a family but still their own person, a person is part of the church family, but still unique and still has to grow in the love of God in their own way.

People who come to have their child baptised come for all sorts of reasons and quite often don't come to church very much at other times and that's fine. It's even more fine if they do, but we in this community remember that God has faith and trust in us and we learn to reflect this by having faith and trust in those who come for baptism with their child, that they come wanting their child to be known by their name and recognised in the community of God and to step through the door and start the adventure that God gives each of us.

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