



36. What is the significance of the use of water in Baptism?

It is sometimes remarked that in the development of liturgy, it is the ritual action that comes first; the explanation of the symbolic action comes afterwards, and may indeed change, though the action itself remains unchanged.

The authorities generally agree that baptism originated in a ritual to symbolise repentance by the washing away of ritual uncleanness with the intent to make a new start. The Essenes, an ascetic Jewish sect active about the time of Jesus, practised elaborate ritual washing with the aim of purifying themselves in preparation for the coming of the Messiah. John the Baptist, too, baptised people 'to repentance', in the River Jordan. Similarly early Christians, too, preferred to baptise converts in running water, so that the stream would symbolically carry away sin.

In Christian baptism, the ritual cleansing was only part of the rite. As the liturgy developed, the adult convert would be exorcised, anointed with cleansing oil, baptised by total immersion, signed with the cross, anointed with perfumed oil, and finally received into the Church. The baptism by immersion was a symbol of the convert's death to sin and rebirth as a child of God - the 'rebirth by water and the Spirit'.

As infant baptism became the norm, the total immersion of the candidate was modified to a gentle dipping or washing three times in 'the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit'. The water in the font is everyday tap water. The priest or minister conducting the baptism prays that it may be the means whereby the blessing of the Holy Spirit is conferred on the person to be baptised.

It is customary, when a member of the Royal Family is baptised, to use water from the River Jordan. At St Mary's, we keep a bottle of Jordan water brought back from the parish pilgrimage to the Holy Land some years ago, in the aumbry. A few drops of this, by now considerably diluted, are added to the water in the font to remind us of the baptism of Jesus; but the baptism would be just as effective and valid without the Jordan water.