



Baptism Hymns

Short Guide No 23: Baptism Hymns

Baptism can occur in different contexts and at different stages in life, yet the fundamental spiritual and ecclesiological purpose and outcome of such initiation is the same. Nevertheless, each context and understanding of baptism demands its own approach if they are going to be not only welcoming celebrations of commitment but opportunities to preach and sing the faith of Christ crucified and risen.

Baptism today

In the UK in 1920, 70% of infants were baptised, mostly in the Church of England. By 1970 this had fallen to 20% and by 2011, to 10%. It is now counter cultural to have one's baby baptised ('christened' as some call it), and adult baptisms are by no means making up the difference. The idea of a service of thanksgiving for a child's birth is making no significant dent in these statistics either. Most of today's children are entering the world without God, will not grow up going to church, if they marry they will do so in a hotel or Register Office and will leave a world in which secular or non-religious funerals are the norm. A quarter of them will, however, go to Church schools. These are huge issues for churches and denominations, necessitating serious evangelisation and engagement. The hymns we sing have no small part to play, and in contexts where new Christians are expressing and cementing their faith, creativity needs to be exercised and opportunities seized. For in any event, a baptism is an occasion on which to both celebrate and to teach the faith.

What, where and when?

Churches and denominations have different perspectives, attitudes and practice for Christian baptism, and there are different perceptions and expectations within the communities churches serve. Some, leaning or held over a font, will have water poured on them; others will experience total immersion in a pool or river. There is a great range from the 'universal', on-demand baptism of infants operated by the Church of England through to adult believers' baptism. Meanwhile some communities will only baptise at a 'main' Sunday service (with or without Holy Communion) whereas others have a special service on a Saturday or Sunday afternoon, with few, if any, of the regular congregation being present. The picking of hymns for these occasions raises different issues, mainly because the congregations have widely divergent expectations and knowledge of hymns and of the rationale behind what is happening in the font, stream or pool.

Children

Churches who baptise infants do so either within the main act of worship or on a separate occasion. Sadly, in the latter case, there is limited opportunity to be creative with hymns or songs. While 'Guide me, O thou great redeemer', 'Sing Hosanna', and 'One more step along the world I go' are popular, hymns are not served well, nor can they serve well in this context. Ministers may well have little choice about the arrangements for baptisms outside the main Sunday service: while some churches have few baptisms, others have lots, often because of the admissions policy to a church school, so requests for baptisms from families who hardly ever attend church, if at all, lead to uncomprehending participation in a service that is not typical of the normal worshipping life of the parish or community. (The same may well also be true of weddings.)

The situation is much improved where baptisms take place within an act of worship on a Sunday morning or evening at which the regular members of the congregation are present. For not only is this ecclesologically and theologically better (the liturgy includes the people 'welcoming' the newly baptised and baptism can be connected to eucharist where appropriate), the congregation are used to singing hymns and will likely have a repertoire of up to 200. Ministers should have an eye to the fact that there will be guests swelling the congregation, some of whom may not be used to singing hymns, but the others will 'carry' them, and it will not be a disaster if unfamiliarity, reticence or resistance prevents some of them joining in. Some will try, and might even learn a hitherto unfamiliar hymn!

Adults

From a hymnological perspective, adult baptisms improve the situation further still. The candidate(s) may have an opinion on the hymns, but whether they have a say or not, will surely join in. As with services of confirmation or infant baptism, there are opportunities for evangelism, and the hymnody has a key part to play in this, and, again, the bulk of the congregation will lead any who are not comfortable singing hymns. Of all the occasional office type services, baptism within the context of usual Sunday worship presents the best vehicle for missionary hymnody with sensitively appropriate selection to reflect the liturgy, the readings and the occasion.

What else is going on?

If a baptism is to occur within a service that has another function too, such as a Eucharist, or involves following the ebb and flow of a liturgical lectionary or sermon series, then some if not all of the hymns chosen should reflect those dimensions of the worship. By the same token, if there is to be baptising in the service, the hymns should not overlook or ignore that fact. At the very least a hymn might be sung as a baptismal party make their way to the font (so often placed for historical reasons at the back or west end of the church), and the hymn can either be broken in two to be sung as the baptismal party journeys towards and then returns from the font, or two separate hymns might be sung, reflecting what is about to happen, and what has happened. A baptismal hymn can express and teach the theology of baptism combined with the immediacy of the real, spiritual event happening then and there. A hymn sung while going to the font might invoke the Holy Spirit and a hymn returning might give thanks, or express hope for what lies ahead of the newly baptised in their lifelong journey of faith. It is also important that any hymn sung 'around' a baptism should be thoroughly 'Christian'. For a baptism is not a social event, but a Christian rite of initiation.

What's on offer?

Good examples of hymns for going to the font include Dave Evans' 'Be still, for the presence of the Lord' (BE STILL), Matthew Bridges' 'My God, accept my heart this day' (ST PETER) or Elizabeth Cosnett's 'We bring our children, Lord, today' (ANGELUS). Possibilities for the journey away from the font include Timothy Dudley-Smith's 'We turn to Christ anew' (LEONI); Michael Seward's 'Baptised in water' (SCHÖNSTER HERR JESU (Leipzig), though BUNESSAN fits); Ronald Turner's 'Child of blessing, child of promise' (SHIPSTON) and Reginald Heber's 'Our children, Lord, in faith and prayer'. Peter Baelz's four-verse 'Source and fount of all creation' (BLAENWERN) could well be divided in half and sung going to and returning from the font. Particularly suitable for infant baptism are Robert Dobbie's 'Eternal God, we consecrate these children to your care' and Judith O'Neill's 'We praise you, Lord, for Jesus Christ' (both use ST FULBERT) and 'God the Father, name we treasure' (ORIEL) by Basil Bridge. For adult baptism, there are J.M. Neale's 'With Christ we share a mystic grave' (ST STEPHEN), Michael Perry's 'Now through the grace of God we claim' (STRACATHRO) and the Scottish Paraphrase of Romans 6:2-7, 'When to the sacred font we came' (CAITHNESS). Notice that the tunes for almost all of these suggestions are well-known, as they probably need to be; for while a choir or congregation can help strangers become singing pilgrims, it never hurts to help with a familiar, confidence-boosting tune. Some Taizé chants are suitable: 'There is one Lord, one faith one baptism' and 'In the Lord I'll be ever thankful' spring to mind. Stephen Dean's 'Water of life' has a similar feel, as does John Bell's 'Behold, behold I make all things new' and 'Take, O take me as I am'.

Given the foregoing, one might expect a great range of choice from the mainstream hymnbooks. A very mixed bag has the *New English Hymnal* offering 2 (one for children and one for adults); *Common Praise* has 7, *Church Hymnary* 4 has 9 and *Laudate* prints 14 which we might consider. *Anglican Hymns Old and New* has very few specifically baptismal hymns, but proposes 22 in its list of suggestions. *Singing the Faith* from the Methodist tradition has a 'Covenant, Commitment and Dedication' section of 22 hymns, some of which are appropriate for infant or adult baptism. *Ancient and Modern: Hymns and songs for refreshing worship* also made special efforts in this area, in a section of 18 hymns, serving a wider remit of 'Christian Initiation'. A new hymn in here is 'At the dawning of creation' to Peter Nardone's specially written tune LONG LANE. The section of a hymn book or suggestions made for the Baptism of Christ (the Second Sunday of Epiphany) are worth looking at, but it is impotent to distinguish between singing about Jesus' baptism by John and singing about the baptism of individuals today, and indeed about our own status as baptised, saved, disciples of Christ. There is potential for confusion here, and ambiguities land harder on visitors or guests.

Conclusion

Whatever is sung at whatever kind of baptism, it is vital to choose in a careful and focused manner, so as to present a coherent and accurate reflection upon, and response to, whatever practice of baptism is manifested. Words and actions must be in harmony. That being so, the hymns can enhance the experience immensely, invoking and inviting the Holy Spirit to descend not only on those being baptised, but also to touch the hearts and minds of everyone present. This is a responsibility and an opportunity that no minister should shy away from or neglect.

Gordon Giles – May 2016 – © The Hymn Society of Great Britain and Ireland

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