

THE GATEWAY TO SALVATION

By SEAN FREYNE

HE WHO BELIEVES and is baptized will be saved; but he who does not believe will be condemned'.¹ This formulation of the later ending to Mark's gospel has played an important part in all subsequent discussion in the Church about the necessity of baptism for salvation. Yet careful consideration of the statement raises questions about baptism which can only be answered against the background of faith and salvation. Faith and baptism are linked together as means of salvation; but in the second half of the statement the absence of faith alone is mentioned as leading to condemnation. Does this mean that faith is more important than baptism? How necessary is baptism and how precisely does it lead to salvation? These are some of the questions which require answering in any fruitful discussion on baptism as the means to salvation.

Considering the problem

'Salvation' is one of those words in our religious vocabulary which needs constant re-definition if it is not to become blunted by daily use. As used by St Paul, *sōtēria* (salvation) and the word-family associated with it refer to end or final salvation. 'Since therefore, we are now justified by his blood, much more shall we be *saved* by him from the wrath of God'.² Later Paul reminds the same roman readers that since they possess the first fruits of the Spirit they groan inwardly, waiting for the adoption of sons, 'since in this hope we were *saved*'.³ Salvation is the final phase of man's reconciliation with God. Insofar as other phases reflect or anticipate the final one, a man may be described as saved in the present. Essentially, however, salvation is the total and ultimate fulfilment of man's relationship with his Creator. As such, salvation is a gift from God, – 'by grace we are saved';⁴ and yet the individual may be said to achieve his own salvation in that he freely responds to the gift

¹ Mk 16, 16.

² Rom 5, 9.

³ Rom 8, 23 ff.

⁴ Eph 2, 6.

he has received and orders his life with this ultimate end in view. Thus salvation must also be seen as a personal reality, a state or condition that is given, but one which the believer makes his own through a life of service after the pattern of Christ's response to his Father.

All this is merely to stress the obvious; yet it poses certain problems once we come to consider the part that baptism plays in achieving salvation. How precisely does baptism start the salvation process for the individual? More specifically still, how does the child who has not yet reached the use of reason make the personal response that the gift of salvation seems to require? The traditional approach, the theology of the manuals, has been to point to the *ex opere operato* efficacy of the sacraments; that is, to their ability to produce their effects independently of the personal response of the believer, provided that certain conditions for valid and fruitful reception are safeguarded. Most of the discussion centred on how these various conditions might be realized in certain 'limit' cases; and the over-all effect tended to reduce the sacrament to a quasi-magical rite. This view of baptism ignored, or at least paid little attention to, the fact that it is merely the beginning of a process which remains to be completed. Theologians, in accepting the absolute necessity of baptism for salvation, were often driven to an impoverished presentation of the theology of the sacrament, because they tended to treat it as a necessary means in isolation from the rest of the christian life. They searched for ways in which baptism might be 'received' in such extraordinary situations as those of the still-born baby, or of the child who dies without baptism through no fault of its own.

The relationship of baptism to faith also poses problems for the traditional theology of the sacrament. Baptism, like the other sacraments, requires faith for its valid and fruitful reception; it is, to use St Thomas's phrase, a 'sacrament of the faith'. In the case of infant baptism, until quite recently, sponsors made the professions of faith on behalf of the child. This was seen as sufficient for the sacrament to have its proper effect. However, such a view was clearly unsatisfactory; historically, the actual rite for the celebration of infant baptism was merely a modification of the one in use for adults. It made no attempt to give expression to the Church's developing understanding of infant baptism. Furthermore, it would appear to presume the consent to faith on the part of the child, who is obviously incapable of making such a free act. Faith comes from

hearing, that is, from the preached word; hence it could be argued that baptism should *follow* an actual profession of faith, as we see happening in the New Testament.⁵ The practice of administering the sacrament only to adults received quite an impetus in Germany through the writings of Karl Barth, and led to a lively theological debate. Barth's position certainly high-lighted many of the deficiencies of the almost mechanical treatment of the sacraments, especially as applied to infants. At the same time, it seemed to run counter to a very old and important tradition in the Church with regard to infant baptism. It also reduced the sacrament itself to a mere confirmatory rite; the external ratification of a justification already received.

A fresh approach seems called for if we are to accept baptism as a necessary means of salvation and at the same time integrate it into the whole process of christian living designed to lead to salvation. There seems little point in making the necessity of the sacrament so absolute that we must stretch it to all kinds of situations in the belief (or is it the fear?) that God's saving action could not otherwise reach such situations. Consequently, before discussing infant baptism, and the specific theological problems surrounding it, we must look at baptism within this wider context. The New Testament teaching on the sacrament, explicitly concerned as it is with adults only, seems a very suitable point of reference for such considerations.

Baptism, the sacrament of our incorporation into Christ

It is important to realise that baptism as a means of salvation does not alter the general structure of the God-man relationship as interpreted by christianity and reflected in the New Testament. Salvation is a gift of God, essentially the action of God upon man. It can never be reduced to merely subjective feelings on the part of man or regarded as the outcome of magical rites by which man might manipulate or control the deity. When we speak of baptism as a means of salvation, it is always within this general context, which is underlined in the New Testament either by the use of the passive voice (a reverential circumlocution for God) to describe the effects of the sacrament on the believer,⁶ or by explicitly making God the author of the baptismal action.⁷ The sacramental action is part of God's new creative action which issued in bodily resurrection for

⁵ E.g. Acts 8, 37.

⁶ Rom 6, 4-6; Col 2, 12.

⁷ Eph 2, 4 ff.

Christ,⁸ and is experienced by the christian as present sanctification: 'But God. . . made us alive together with Christ . . . and raised us up together with him . . . For by grace you have been saved through faith; and this is not your own doing, it is the gift of God . . . For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works'.⁹

Of course this does not mean that baptism reduces the christian to absolute passivity before God. This is illustrated in the most striking way by the baptism of Jesus, which clearly played an important part in the subsequent understanding of the role of the sacrament in the christian life. The baptism of Jesus was his 'anointing with the Spirit' for his ministry of preaching and healing.¹⁰ In a very real sense he considered his baptism to be still ahead of him, yet to be accomplished by his death at Jerusalem.¹¹ Baptism is a sealing by God, a consecration to a life lived for God. It acquires its full meaning only in these terms of dedication on the part of the believer, of one who *experiences* the saving presence of God through the sacramental action.

Baptism is a focusing or concentration of God's saving presence for the believer. It can be further specified in terms of Christ's death and resurrection, the one and only saving event of the new dispensation. Paul reminds the corinthians that the gospel he received and later handed on to them was: 'that Christ *died* for our sins in accordance with the scriptures: that he was *buried* and that he *rose* the third day in accordance with the scriptures'.¹² Later, when Paul wishes to explain to the romans the significance of their baptismal union with Christ, he has recourse to this credal statement of their faith: 'Do you not know', he writes, 'that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his *death*. We were *buried* therefore with him by baptism into death, so that as Christ was *raised* from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life'.¹³ In other words, baptism for Paul is the embodiment in sacramental rite of the saving event of Jesus Christ, which is the substance of the gospel that is preached. It is not that Christ dies and rises again each time that baptism is conferred. Rather, the sacramental rite is the means whereby the individual makes contact with the once-for-all saving event of Christ's death and resurrection, an event which in the divine plan included all

⁸ 1 Cor 15.

¹¹ Mk 10, 37; Lk 13, 32.

⁹ Eph 2, 4-10.

¹² 1 Cor 15, 4.

¹⁰ Acts 10, 38.

¹³ Rom 6, 3-4.

men. As the new Adam, Christ's love-filled action was done on our behalf. It includes all of us in its range and motivation: 'For the love of Christ leaves us no choice, when once we have reached the conclusion that one man died for all and therefore all mankind has died'.¹⁴ The baptismal theology of Paul presupposes an understanding of the universal scope and significance of Christ's saving action in the Father's plan. 'God was in Christ reconciling *the world* to himself';¹⁵ and baptism is the means whereby this saving action touches the believer and shares its blessings with him.

The New Testament indicates that faith is also absolutely necessary for salvation; so that we must examine, however briefly, the mutual relationship between faith and baptism in the saving process. A superficial reading of Paul's epistles might indicate that faith and baptism were two independent and separate ways to salvation. In his controversies with the judaizers, Paul is adamant that a man is justified by faith and not by works of the law.¹⁶ In these contexts there is no explicit mention of baptism; but several indications make it clear that Paul has no intention of excluding the sacrament, or of treating it as an alternative means of salvation. First of all, for Paul, the real difference between faith and the works of the law as a means of salvation consists in the attitude towards God that each presupposes. Faith itself is a gift from God,¹⁷ as St Thomas declares when he describes faith as 'the first act that God performs whereby the believer submits himself to the God who justifies him and so receives grace'. Thus Paul can speak about the 'obedience of the faith'¹⁸ as that which mediates the obedience of Christ to the believer and eradicates from his heart the disobedience of Adam: the latter specified as the refusal to accept oneself as creature, and therefore in need of God in order to achieve fulfilment. The 'works of the law', on the other hand, create an attitude of self-sufficiency and smugness which, in the end, leads a person to believe that he can achieve his own salvation without any need for God; the very essence of the Adam story as Genesis describes it. In a word, the faith that justifies is a faith that leads a man to submit himself to the saving action of God; and for Paul, this inevitably means acceptance of baptism, in which, as we have seen, the saving action of God is concentrated in the Church.

The connection between faith and baptism is explicitly underlined

¹⁴ 2 Cor 5, 14.

¹⁷ Eph 2, 8.

¹⁵ 2 Cor 5, 19.

¹⁸ Rom 1, 8; 16, 26.

¹⁶ Rom 3, 21; Gal 3, 2.

in a number of contexts, of which perhaps Galatians 3 is the most important: 'But now that faith *has come*, we are no longer under a custodian (v. 25); for in Christ Jesus you *are* all sons of God through faith (v. 26). For as many of you as *were baptized* into Christ *have put on* Christ (v. 27)'.¹⁹

On the basis of this text we might describe the relationship between faith and baptism as follows. Baptism as a means of salvation belongs to the realm of faith, that is, the realm in which man recognizes fully the need for God's saving action in his regard if he is to be saved; baptism is a historical moment within this general context: an objective, once-for-all meeting with God's saving action in Christ. And it issues in a life of faith; that is, in personal involvement by the believer as a son of God in achieving the salvation he has been offered.

These considerations from the New Testament concerning the role of baptism as a means of salvation have important consequences for our discussion on infant baptism. We must never reduce the sacrament to a mere external rite of aggregation to the community of faith. Baptism is an objective meeting with the once-for-all saving event of Christ's death and resurrection. Its necessity is based on the fact that christianity is a historical religion, tied absolutely to the saving event of God in the earthly life of Jesus of Nazareth. At the same time, faith is also required *before* as well as after baptism, in order that the individual might submit himself to the sacramental action of the saving God which will subsequently issue in a life of faith. Faith, like baptism, is essentially the action of God; but it takes on a more personal, subjective note than the sacrament. It is faith which leads a person to recognize the need for God's action in his regard. It brings him to the acceptance of that action both as a once-for-all occurrence and a life-long living out of its implications. It is noteworthy that the New Testament emphasizes both these aspects of the process of salvation; and the fact that adults alone are in question, people who are capable of making the personal submission involved in the act of faith, makes the insistence on

¹⁹ Gal 3, 25-27. Here careful attention must be paid to the tense and voice of the underlined verbs in greek. In v. 25 the aorist tense is used to describe a once-for-all action in the past, whereby 'faith' has superseded 'the law' as the dominant quality of the new era of salvation-history introduced by Christ. Next the present tense is used to indicate the permanent state of christians actively engaged as sons of God in the present (v. 26). Finally 'you have been baptised' (v. 26) is an aorist passive used to describe the once-for-all divine action in the past that has made the present activity of the christian a genuine possibility.

baptism all the more remarkable. The faith that justifies will tend to submit itself to the saving action of God in Christ where this is now to be found: that is, in the sacramental action of the Church. Neglect of either faith or baptism which leads to the over-emphasis of the other devolves into individualistic pietism or magical ritual. Both are erroneous positions, which fail to appreciate the ontological and existential character of the christian faith.

Infant baptism: a new approach

We are now in a better position to discuss infant baptism and its significance, with the possible dangers arising from isolating it from the rest of the christian life.

First of all, it is important to consider that process of personalization and appropriation which is the history of any human life. Life is both a gift and a challenge, a sharing of something we hold in common and an intensely personal act of affirmation and articulation of what we have received. This personal discovery of life and its meaning always takes place in community: the basic community of the family in which the gift of life itself is received, then the school, the town, the country, with an ever-widening horizon of perspective, experience and meaning. Every expansion of the immediate horizon, each discovery of wider perspectives through new experience, involves the individual in a personal decision: a decision which means laying hold of his past, adapting himself to his new experience, and integrating it into that past. All these various moments of transcendence are like points which eventually merge into a line, representing the individual's history of growth and development to full maturity and adulthood. No one moment may be isolated from the rest or treated as though it represented the total process. Neither can one isolate personal affirmation from all that is given on the level of genetics, psychology, sociology and so on. What is given is certainly prior in time; and often it would also seem prior in importance in determining the future history of the individual.

The christian life cannot be isolated from human life and the process by which the individual grows to full maturity, since christianity is not just something superimposed on a fully developed human personality. If a life is to be fully christian, it should develop and grow throughout the human life, as this matures and develops. Christianity is genuine humanism, in that it authentically interprets the meaning of human existence, pointing the way to genuine self-

fulfilment through self-transcendence. Such an understanding may involve a very different approach than has hitherto been customary to the initiation of christians in the faith and their subsequent education. Their faith must help them to understand their world as they discover it and as it is given to them. This will involve a constant re-interpretation of their faith in the light of each new stage of development. Such re-interpretation will always seek to preserve the ontological or given basis for life as seen by christianity through the sacraments, and the existential or personal aspect represented by the life of faith.

The role and significance of infant baptism must be seen against this background as the vital and normal starting point for the whole process of growing up in the faith. It may well be that the emergence of infant baptism as a normal practice was a gradual phenomenon in the life of the Church, and the reasons advanced for the practice may have varied from a hope of preservation from bodily harm to more spiritual motives such as remission of sins or need of salvation. Yet it can be readily seen that the practice fits in admirably with an understanding of the christian life as an interpretation of human existence. The christian gospel recognizes that man's life is given to him in community. This truth needs constant re-affirmation if one is to avoid the pitfalls of selfishness and pride which are at the centre of man's revolt against God, a revolt that has also distorted his relationship with his fellow man.

Recently, a new rite has been introduced for infant baptism, which would seem to suggest that the Church wishes this age-old practice to be seen in a new light. The parents and godparents are now asked to make a profession of their own faith, and are not called to speak on behalf of the child as heretofore. This very definite change of emphasis recognizes that the child to be baptized is situated in a real context of faith. The action of the parents, based on their own experience, recognizes the need for every man to submit himself to the saving action of God, if he is to overcome the disorders that are at the root of his own existence, and thus to discover true selfhood. Consequently, the parents present the child to the saving action of God in the sacrament, sharing with their offspring the true understanding of existence that they themselves have discovered, just as originally they co-operated in bringing it into existence.

Their action is an act of faith and a programme for action; it is the sharing of a gift as precious as life itself and the acceptance of

responsibility as wide-ranging as that of parenthood. They realize that their action in no way destroys the freedom of the child to personalize this life they have shared with it. Yet they are aware that their child's freedom is always conditioned, never absolute. They recognize that to leave a child 'to make up its own mind' in adulthood would be a delusion and a misunderstanding, since already the 'life-situation' of the child in a given time, place and circumstances will have orientated it in a particular direction. They feel that it is their privilege and their responsibility to ensure that their child is placed in a faith-situation from the very beginning, in which it will grow and develop to adulthood through the christian vision they wish to share with it. Their action is an act of hope in the saving God who has graciously sealed their child with his saving action, and who will, they know, complete the work he has begun.

The parents are encouraged in their action in the knowledge that the responsibility they have undertaken in faith is shared with others: with the sponsors of the child, its relatives and, indeed, the whole local ecclesial community, in whose presence their action has been performed and with whose assent it has been ratified. They are reassured that the values they will inculcate in their child, values based on the faith they possess and the action they have performed, are shared by the community in which the child will live and grow during its early, formative years. They do not see their action as an isolated or mechanical operation. They know from the experience of their own lives, and life as it is lived around them, that the disorders of human existence are not wiped away by some stroke of magic; they require daily vigilance if they are to be overcome. Thus the decision to resist such disorders cannot be taken too soon or reiterated too frequently. In particular, they are aware that without the help of God's saving action in their lives, any such decisions, however well meaning the intention, are doomed to frustration from the outset. It is this knowledge of their faith and of themselves that prompts them to present their child for God's saving action in the sacrament at the very beginning of its career in the world.

Once seen in this light, baptism as a means of salvation is in no danger of becoming a magical rite of salvation for the infant, nor will it destroy the faith-response that is required from each individual in search of salvation. Rather it initiates the child into an ontological relationship with its Saviour, God in Christ; and this relationship must subsequently be personally affirmed at every stage

of growth and development, both in terms of other sacramental actions such as confirmation and the eucharist, and in the personal life of faith. In particular, such an approach recognizes that each child is born into a community which is responsible to a large degree for its growth to full maturity. In this case the christian family, and the ecclesial community of which it is a part, share through infant baptism with its new member the transcendental view of life it enjoys as the only satisfactory explanation of human existence.