

Milestones . . .

Milestones are certain points within your life. They could be birthdays, a new job, first teeth etc. They are really important occasions for individuals, and should be celebrated by the Church in some way – that is the Church community, or the Church in your own home.

Over the next few months we will be exploring some milestones for families – particularly children and young people. There will be stories, ideas, discussion and some points of reflection.

This month, leading up to the birth of our Lord, we thought it fit to focus on pregnancy and all that goes with it. This is an important milestone in anyone's life – especially for the women who grows and changes along side this small life that is within her. So, as a Church, how do we, or can we, celebrate this milestone?

Belly Blessing!

To become pregnant has a variety of responses in our society today, depending on what your life circumstances are. For many people it is an occasion of joy and celebration, especially if it has come after a long period of hoping and trying to conceive (which for many of my own friends has been the case). We often neglect this part of the journey within the Church – and yet for mother and child, it can be a most difficult time in their journey – even dangerous.

So, we should celebrate and bless this time! In a number of Churches the tradition of blessing a pregnancy, fondly known as belly blessings, has become part of the norm for the community. It can be done quite simply, or you can go all out depending on your traditional background.

I have seen it done in Parishes where a group of parishioners have laid hands upon the mother and a few have placed their hands on the growing baby (bump) and simply prayed for this time to be one of celebration and good growth. Please note – always get the mother's permission to put your hand on her stomach (consider this important life lesson number 2032b!). I have also seen it done in a similar fashion, but where holy oil was used to anoint the mother on the head and on her "belly".

The purpose of "belly blessings" then is to celebrate the conception of a new life, pray for the pregnancy and impending birth, pray for the small child who is forming and growing, and look forward to the time when they will be present with us as we celebrate our lives and God within them.

There is certainly no scriptural reference that I am aware of for doing this, but two readings that are worth considering on the day of a belly blessing are:

1. Mary meeting Elizabeth – Luke 1:39-56
2. Psalm 139: 13-18

Naming the Baby

A current trend seems to not tell a living soul the names chosen for a baby until shortly after the birth. Why this is I have no conclusive evidence, but it is not a tradition that I think is a good one.

Choosing a child's name, whether or not it is the one that you end up staying with, is very important. All of a sudden the small mass of growing cells becomes a person – Simon, Mark, Mary, Joe – whatever. So, parents why not pick a few names and share them with people. Allow people to then use them when praying for the growing child and their family. Explore why you have chosen such a name – what is it's meaning, and why do you like it. It will also give you the chance to practice using the name – and really get to know if it is suitable – or if it really is terrible and this child will suffer tremendously because you have called him or her – who knows what?

Please note that you don't need to know the sex of a child to start picking names. Many families are choosing not to know the child's sex until the actual birth. This makes for a wonderful surprise (and a great Parish fundraiser!). The main point of naming the child before the birth is sharing with your community. This makes it a very special occasion for everyone – and when the child is born, we all know what potential names have been decided upon – so no surprises, or more importantly, awkward situations where you find out the child's name and say, "Oh, that's a lovely name", but deep down are thinking 'Who picked that one?'

Relating to the child within

Research is showing more and more how much the unborn child actually hears and responds to. Many parents already play music, read, and even sing to their unborn baby. Why not try this with some of our Christian story? Read your bible, sing songs from Church, pray aloud with your child and for your child, play Christian CD's and tapes around the house.

Baby Shower

Recently in my own Parish of Morpeth we had the joy of having a Parish Baby Shower for Katherine and Hugh Lindsay. It was a great morning full of fun and games, along with lots of gooing and gaaing (believe me, it was not from any baby's). We bobbed for dummies, practiced putting nappies on, played pass the parcel, toasted Katherine and Hugh, prayed for them and finished the morning with lunch together. It was a simple occasion that had been well planned by some of the Mum's in the congregation. Everyone who attended, both men and women, delighted in just being present to celebrate the impending birth and partake in a little part of the journey of that child.

Choosing Godparents

Choosing Godparents for children can be a bit of a minefield in some families, but it should be more of a celebration. Often they are not chosen until well after the birth of the child and don't take on any "formal" responsibilities until the day of the baptism.

Let's go back a step and reflect on why we even bother with Godparents? There are several trains of thought:

1. Originally these people were chosen should the parents not survive. They then got the job of raising the child – many may be relieved to know that this is no longer the case.
2. Godparents were selected because it was believed that the child was not able to make promises and so they made promises on their behalf. This is still the

case in many Churches. A good question to ask any potential Godparent is how they will transfer those promises back to the child? Even more important, what do they understand those promises to mean?

3. Godparents were often assigned the duty for the spiritual upbringing of the child. My question is, what about the parents? All the statistics show that it is the actual parents who have the greatest influence upon a child's set of beliefs and faith.

I believe that many Godparents are selected because they are good mates with the parents, or because of family pressure etc. I don't think that these are good reasons for selecting anyone. We want the best for our children, and so, I believe that we need to choose Godparents who are there to prayerfully support both parents, and the child, in every aspect of life. They need to be people of good character and who demonstrate their faith through their actions as well as their words.

So, having people like these around during pregnancy is probably a good thing. They will pray for and support this new family that is forming – this new Church being made (remember, where two or three are gathered – this applies to families as well!). So, why don't we choose Godparents earlier – give them a real role in all that is taking place, rather than just being a part of the ceremony on the day of baptism.

In the next edition, we will look at Baptism, which will be good timing as we celebrate in January the Naming and Circumcision of Christ on the 1st, and his Baptism on the 12th. CEY Ministries would love to hear your stories or thoughts on any of the above!

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