

Milestones . . .

This is part 2 of an ongoing set of articles exploring Milestones in our lives – especially those celebrated by families. I am particularly focusing on events that we as Church can celebrate with families. The last articles explored pregnancy and leading up to the birth, including the selection of Godparents. This article is going to look at physical and also being born into the family of the Church through Baptism.

Being Born

One of my favourite scenes in Monty Python's film the Meaning of Life is entitled "Being Born". The scene involves a mother who is told to not do anything as she "is not qualified", the father is sent out of the room as he was in the way (despite the 30 odd other people who were present), and the most important person in the entire scene was the hospital administrator who was glad that the machine that goes "ping" was present.

What's this got to do with milestones? Well, there are possibly not many more significant milestones in one's life than being born, or be a parent who has given birth. Monty Python's parody shows how often the miracle of life can get lost in the hype. So, how do we as Church celebrate this great event?

To begin with about ensuring that there is something nice waiting to welcome the new family home. The last thing that anyone would want to do is cook. So, why not arrange a nice meal for the family? It is also a gesture of care to ensure that there is a card signed by everyone, and even some flowers. I have even seen people send letters to the new born, welcoming him/her into the world, giving thanks for him/her, and ensuring the family of prayers. Even though they can't read it, it is special for parents, and something for the children to read when they are old enough.

Also, a few days after it would be ideal to gather together at the family's home or in the Church for a service of Thanksgiving for a Child (p.43 of the Red Prayer Brick).

Baptism

On the 5th March this year, I will celebrate the anniversary of my Baptism. Twenty-seven years ago on this day I was dunked in some water and made a full member of this strange thing called the Body of Christ. It is a very special day for me, but, no one will probably send me a card, give me a call and wish me a happy anniversary, and I am sure there wont be cake. Why is that?

Baptism is one of the sacraments of the Church. In fact, it is one of only two that the Church worldwide seems to acknowledge as being a sacrament, the other of course being the Eucharist. So, why after the actual event itself don't we celebrate it as something very special – a milestone in our life!

I think something that is really important for us as a Church to consider is, how do we make the Baptism of a child a significant occasion, one that they will not forget? If people are going to celebrate this event, it has to be something that was/is memorable. There are many ways to go about this, and I have been sent some wonderful ideas that are happening throughout our Churches. I want to share three ideas that I particularly like.

The first happens in the service of Baptism itself. You need to plan very carefully about how you will include all the people who are present, particularly the family and any children. This can be done very simply through allowing different children to pour the water into the font as the prayers over the water are being said, or asking the Godparents to light the baptismal candle from the paschal candle, and then pass it along, through the congregation, to the priest who then presents it to the Child. There are many, many ways in which we can make this a special time. Call me if you want some more ideas!

Another tradition is the gift of a decorated candle. You need to give a candle that is going to last until that person is at least confirmed, so make it good. Encourage people to light it on their anniversary of their baptism – it could be the centerpiece at dinner that night. This gives people the opportunity to then even talk about the service, think about what it means, and reflect on how they are living as a light in the world.

My favourite idea for celebrating this milestone involves a bit of work, but I think is truly worth the effort. Have a parishioner take photos at the Baptism – a whole roll, even two rolls. In the following week get them developed and put them into a big album – one that has plenty of room to add lots more photos. Someone could decorate the album, and on the inside cover should be space to allow parishioners room to write their personal welcome into the Body of Christ, and offer them blessings throughout their life. There is room left in the back, because this is to become a faith journal. Parents should be encouraged to add photos, drawings, stories etc that relate to the faith of their child. You may want to even add some pages with some questions on them and spaces for parents to add bits, eg, When you were ___ years old, you asked ___ about God.

Of course the aim of all of this is to encourage families to share their faith with each other, and for us, the Church, to be the primary people who initiate and encourage these conversations and activities to take place – either on our turf, or more importantly, on theirs – the home.

Next month we will look at celebrating the first two years of life. I would love to hear from people, particularly newer parents, as to how they have been celebrating milestones in their life and ensuring that God is at the centre of these celebrations.