

Some of you may have heard of Blarney in Ireland. It is a medieval castle near Cork. Built into the battlements near the top is the famous Blarney Stone which, when kissed, is meant to bestow the gift of eloquence and sweet talk!

It is not an easy stone to reach and kiss as you have to lean backwards from the parapet, just holding on to an iron railing! However the tradition goes back centuries and “blarney” as a word came into the English language in the reign of Queen Elizabeth I.

Some time ago, with friends, who are actually here in church this morning so what I am about to say must be true! We visited Blarney when in Cork City for a wedding. We went not to see Blarney Castle or even to kiss the stone but to see a little church nearby which had received a lot of publicity because it had been renovated and re-ordered.

How the local vicar got away with what was done we will never know. Beautiful walnut panels had been painted matt white, the tiled floor had been overlaid with a type of rubberoid covering, a new modern altar was supported by steel tubular legs and microphone cables were everywhere.

But what you met entering the church was a font with a difference. It was for total immersion, about 3 feet high and shaped like a coffin! It was made of black slate but with blue swimming pools tiles on the inside!

We fled in horror! And wondered how the vicar in question had become a bishop!

I suppose the idea of the font was good because, as you will hear in a few minutes, one of the often strange statements at a baptism is about “dying to sin and rising to new life”. This is indicating that Baptism is all about a new start and a new life.

In New Testament times, before the church had its own separate buildings, baptisms would often be conducted in a river. Those wishing to become Christians would enter the water on one bank, often in old clothes, and then having been baptised by being totally submerged under the water 3 times – in the name of the Father, of the Son and of the Holy Spirit – they would then leave the river by the other bank. This was to symbolise a new start and as they left the water they would be given a white robe to replace their old clothes to emphasise, as today's epistle puts it, that by baptism they had now "clothed themselves with Christ" and had become "children of God through faith."

Baptism as a rite of initiation goes back a long time – even before Christianity.

Interestingly the person being baptised was supported by 3 people known as "fathers of baptism", and this practice may be the origin of godparents.

Baptism is for all who want to be part of God's family as today's epistle stresses, all are equal and equally loved by God. As someone once said, "God has no favourites."

And it wasn't long before whole families and households were being baptised and that would have included children as well as adults.

In our service today we ask parents and godparents to promise that they will support and encourage Ellie and help her grow spiritually as well as in every other area of her life.

Baptism is also mentioned in today's Gospel. It comes in response to the ambitious brothers, James and John, wanting to bag the best positions for themselves in God's kingdom. Jesus asks them "Are you able to ...be baptised with the baptism I am baptised with?"

Yes, Jesus himself was baptised in the river Jordan by John the Baptist, but in this passage he is not just thinking about the ceremony but what happens afterwards.

Baptism means to be submerged – as ship gets submerged by towering waves in stormy seas, and what Jesus seems to be saying to James and John is ‘Can you remain true to me even if, like me, you have to face opposition and trouble?’

In some parts of the world persecution for Christians is a reality – yet our lives can become submerged by all kinds of other demands and busy-ness, and God can get squeezed out.

So, in many ways, being at a service of baptism can be a call to remember what being a Christian is all about. It reminds us that God always takes the initiative in inviting us to be members of his family, and this is so obvious when a baby is baptised. Before Ellie can even understand, or be aware, of what’s happening today, God is reaching out to her, assuring her of his love and welcome.

Ellie’s full-name is Eleanor Monica. Now I know that a certain person isn’t that fussy on being called Monica but it is the name of another important person who lived a long-time.

One person from the early centuries of the Church who influenced later Church history more than any other was Augustine (430), who became Bishop of Hippo in North Africa. Augustine himself, however, recognized that largely his Christian faith was an answer to the prayers of his mother Monica.

Monica was born into a Christian family about 333 and she had several sisters in the family which may have influenced the fact that she was a peacemaker who often reconciled quarrelling.

Monica married Patricius and they had a son Augustine. Who for the benefits of a Sunday morning and being before the watershed let's say lived a colourful life. But his mother, Monica, never stopped praying and never gave up on her wayward son. It was in Italy that Augustine finally became a Christian. He was baptized in the church where Monica had often prayed. Her grief turned to joy.

Augustine became a very prominent theologian and leader in his own age and his writings had a major influence on Christian thought. I will say he turned out to be a bit a kill-joy in later life but his book *The Confessions* can still be found on most clergy book shelves.

But it is **not** Augustine but his mother who I believe is the example as we baptise Eleanor Monica this morning.

Monica who never gave up and never stopped praying. We all need a Monica in our lives who never gives up on us and who keeps us in their prayers. And we can all be that person. Monica was an encourager in the faith for her son and we can all be encouragers in the faith.

Who have we encouraged recently, who have we taken time to pray for, who have we built up in the faith?

And as Ellie's family bring her for baptism today and promise to encourage and pray for her, so we are reminded that we are part of a wider family – God's family – and as such, we also have a duty to be "encouragers in the faith" and to be a church where there is welcome and inclusion for all regardless of who they are.

God's promises in baptism are not blarney. The promises that parents and godparents and this congregation are about to make to be encouragers in the faith for Ellie are not blarney. It is a guarantee of his love and presence with us always, however submerged we may become. Not blarney but reliable and sure and to be celebrated as we now baptise Ellie.