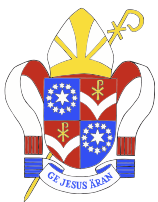




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# God's love is like the beach and like the grass

*A letter from Bishop Åke Bonnier about the baptism*



Svenska kyrkan   
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## Dear Parishioner

Sixty years ago I was baptised at my grandparents' place at Floragatan Street in Stockholm. My mother and father had asked a priest from a neighbouring parish to come and carry out the baptism.

I am not sure whether the priest engaged in any pre-baptismal conversations with my parents. But I do know that my grandmother was also my Godmother. She had converted to the Roman Catholic church. My father belonged to the Jewish congregation but was not a practising Jew. I am convinced my grandmother prayed for me and my siblings regularly during the 16 remaining years of her life.

In a way, my baptism marked the beginning of my life in the church even though, technically, like almost everyone else, I was a member of the Swedish Church from birth. In those days, any new-born who had at least one parent in the Swedish Church automatically belonged to the Swedish Church. Incidentally, that is no longer so.

I was a parish priest for 28 years and baptised countless infants, many confirmands and even a number of adults. The baptism is something truly extraordinary. It is a sign of love from God.

### Pursued by trolls

When I was a child, my mother read many fairytales for me. A particular favourite was "Sampo Lappelill". It is a story by Zacharias Topelius about the little Sami boy who was chased by trolls and fled to the nice vicar, who baptised him. That way, the trolls could no longer pursue him.

The book is based on a lousy theology which says



Photo: Carla Karlsson

that, for the person who is not baptised, everything literally "goes to hell". In those days it was also said that one must never set off on a journey with unbaptised children. But that was based on a theology that presumed that God was Christian, that you must be a Christian to avoid eternal damnation. Such a theology implied that countless people who were not Christians were damned. In a system like that, Hell would have filled up pretty quickly! And heaven would have been correspondingly empty.

I often think about a quotation by Martin Luther, where he said that when he went to Heaven he expected to be surprised by three things. First, that many would be there whom he didn't think would be there. Second, that many were not there whom he thought would be there. And third, that he himself was there!

### Infinite love

Baptism is about love, about God's infinite love based on the death and resurrection of Jesus. God says to me and you: "I love you so incredibly much. I love you because you are you."

That is why we need the baptism: In the baptism, we receive a sign of God's love. Luther writes in his Small Catechism that the baptism involved not plain water, but water that embodies God's mission and the words of God.

Luther says that the water does not mean anything on its own. What makes it special is that it is God's word which is in and with the water, and faith which trusts such word of God in the water. But even though there is the faith and the word, we also need fresh, clean water which gurgles and glitters and which we can touch and feel. We need real water as a concrete sign of God's love.

A sign is valuable only if it represents something. The water is the sign but the baptism is the sacrament. According to Martin Luther, a sacrament is character-



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A picture from Jordan river where Jesus was baptised.

rised by God's promise and word united in an earthly referent. A sacrament is a holy act which delivers on its promise, and which was first introduced by Jesus.

According to Matthew, Jesus said, *"All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptising them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age."* (Matthew 28:18-20)

### **We belong together**

The baptism also expresses a sense of community. We, the baptised, are united with God, with Jesus himself. That is what the baptism testifies. We are brought into a community of the baptised stretching back to the first Christians.

Jesus was not a Christian but was baptised by John the Baptist. It was not a Christian baptism but a kind of baptism of cleansing and conversion. John the Baptist had his doubts but Jesus was insistent. When Jesus was baptised, he stepped into the water as a kind of act of solidarity with each and every one of us. He did it to show us that he shares everything that is ours, everything in your existence and mine.

When he emerged from the water, God himself confirmed Jesus's mission. Matthew tells us: *"When Jesus came from Galilee to the Jordan to be baptised by John. But John tried to deter him, saying, 'I need to be baptised by you, and do you come to me?' Jesus replied, 'Let it be so now; it is proper for us to do this to fulfill all righteousness.' Then John consented. As soon as Jesus was baptised, he went up out of the water. At that moment heaven was opened, and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and alighting on him. And a voice from heaven said, 'This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased.'* (Matthew 3:13-17)



It is not known whether the Apostles, such as Peter, James and John, were baptised.

We do know that Paul was baptised (Acts 9:18) and know that several contemporaries of his were also baptised – baptism has since continued for 2,000 years. Everyone baptised in water in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, regardless of which religious community they belong to, becomes part of the worldwide Christian Church. It consists of everyone baptised through history, and every time someone is baptised they join this community.

### **Never abandoned**

On getting baptised, a person also joins the Church of Sweden if they have not already done so through direct application. We are very glad for all our members and hope every member feels proud and happy to belong to the Swedish Church. It is a Church that wants to be Jesus-centred and inclusive at the same







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time, and which wants to stand up against all that is destructive, against everything that wants to break things down.

In that context, the baptism important as an expression of God's love which is like "the beach and the grass, the wind and the vastness and an infinite home"(Sv.Ps 289). The baptism also communicates the idea that God never abandons you. Jesus is with you, despite everything. In the act of baptism, we pour water over the candidate's head. And we do this three times. In the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit.

Water is an expression of life, of everything that makes us grow and live. The recent summer has made us realise the ills that shortages of water can cause, what droughts mean in terms of threats and risks. The water of the baptism is therefore a reminder of God's life, which belongs to all our lives.

### **Darkness and light**

But water can also represent chaos. We often hear about floods. Sometimes they take place in Sweden, more often further afield. Large masses of water have engulfed people in tsunami disasters or other large flooding events.

When a small child is born, the water reminds us of both life and death, and the fact that God is bound together with everything good as well as everything challenging. Just as God was with Jesus in death, God accompanies the child in everything dark and difficult.

The priest often lifts up the child to show to tho-

se who are present that everything is well and good. And the "journey" between the baptismal font and raised child is a symbol for our daily journey through life, where God is also present.

In short, the baptism wants to express the idea that those who are baptised are infinitely loved and never abandoned.

When we baptise we do it because it is so important to share God's generosity, to demonstrate God's love and care, to show a God who never abandons and who does not turn away even when everything else lets you down.

I hope those of you who have read this letter are pleased with your baptism or, if you are not baptised, that it inspires you to do so. It is never too late to be baptised. At any moment in a person's lifetime, it is possible to be baptised. You are infinitely loved because you are you and that is what the baptism seeks to confirm.

May God, Lord of the Baptism, bless you now and for evermore.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to be "Tite" followed by a stylized flourish.

### **Questions to discuss**

1. What do you know about your own baptism?
2. Is the baptism important for you? Why? Why not?
3. What ideas in this letter were important?
4. What can we do to make the baptism seem relevant to new parents today?