



Rites of Welcome at Holy Covenant

by the Revd Dr Wayne Brighton



Grow

introduction

This booklet provides a little information about baptism, christenings, dedications, confirmations, receptions and renamings that are known as rites of welcome.

It written for parents and godparents that wish to celebrate these rites of welcome at Holy Covenant Anglican Church.

Approaching a church for something this important is stressful. Churches are unfamiliar places that look old fashioned and do things in strange ways. Ministers can be strangers who ask us questions about things we've barely thought about.

Hopefully this booklet will make the journey a little easier. It will give you some of the basics and provide a few questions that you might wish to think about or discuss with your partner. Feel free to ask questions of the minister about your own baptism, christening, dedication or confirmation because we may not have fully understood the gift we received earlier in life.

why have a rite of welcome?

Baptism, christenings, dedications, confirmations, receptions and renamings can mean different things to different people.

For some these rites of welcome are about:

- **belonging** where the rites are about connections with family, tradition and the church;
- **behaving** where the rites are about religious values and behaviours that we want to pass on to our children or adopt for ourselves; or
- **believing** where the rites are about our beliefs about God and life eternal.

At Holy Covenant we understand these rites to be about all of these things and more. As an inclusive and diverse community, all are welcome to receive these rites because they are not limited by affordability or age, ability or limited physical or intellectual capacity, ethnicity or marital status, gender identity or sexual orientation. They are only limited by your hunger and thirst for life in God's eternal kingdom.

Beginnings

a seed

Everybody wants a good life. We long for a deeper sense of prosperity, security and community. Yet we are often unsure how or where to grow such a life in a world that can promise much but deliver little.

The rites of welcome are seeds that can help a good life to grow. A life that is whole, healthy and connected. This seed can be planted at any age, at any time, in any place.

Any plant takes soil, sunlight and water to grow. The seed sprouts a stem and then leaves with flowers and fruit to follow. Just as the seed must be sown first to get any harvest, so the seed of good life needs to be planted so that our desire for prosperity, security and community can grow in healthy, life giving ways.

The soil, sunlight and water that we need to grow comes in the form of gift and a story - God's big story.

a gift

Rites of welcome are ceremonies done in response to God's big story. They are gifts that can only be offered and received through the church. When these ceremonies are shared, good things begin to grow.

The church shares these gifts because of what Jesus told his first students, 'All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age' (Matthew 28.18-21).

These rites of welcome are a way of saying in public that, I'd like to be a part of what God is doing! It's where we start to learn about God's big story and how we can help out. Like any gift, baptism can also get left in the box. We might receive the gift but never think about what it means.

God's story

the Creator

The rites of welcome connect us with God's big story of salvation. This story enables us to see who we are, where we've been, where we're going and why.

God's big story begins and ends with the Creator. The Creator who made everything from suns to supernovas and starfish gives us life too. Justice, peace and wholeness is God's plan for creation.

Traditionally, God has been called Father, which sounds formal and strange today. Jesus called God, Dad. The name recalls the idea that God is not simply our parent but the source from which we have come and to whom we will return.

Unlike human parents, God's love is untarnished and unending. The Creator made each of us to be unique, invaluable and irreplaceable. There is and will never be anyone quite like you. Your gifts and contribution to this world are inestimable. You were made to play a part in God's eternal kingdom.

Isaiah described the purposes of creation in the most evocative terms (Isaiah 65.17-25). Humanity is made to be a joy and delight. God wants people to live long and fulfilling lives. They are to make homes and live with security. They are to work and be prosperous. They are to be connected in community with God and each other.

Sadly, life turned out different. Sin is that spiritual reality where things go awry, turn out wrong or just get stuffed up. All too often life becomes awful, short, disappointing, insecure, tiresome and lonely.

Fear, anger and shame pushed humanity in another direction. Some got their prosperity by exploiting others. Some found security by dominating others. Some found community by excluding others.

This story of creation and humanity's frustration at falling into exploitation, injustice and conflict is seen throughout the Old Testament in the story of Abraham's children and their hopes that lie just out of reach.

Following

the Son

Thankfully, the Creator sent an ambassador, Jesus the Son, to not only show us the way but to bring us back into the everlasting kingdom. Jesus showed us how things were meant to be and how we can live whole and healthy lives in a world that can be hurtful and harmful. Jesus invites us into God's big story to discover who we are meant to be and what we are yet to become. You can read more about Jesus in the New Testament.

When Jesus arrived, no one knew or cared until he started healing people and speaking about God's kingdom. Those who were aimless, empty, excluded, ashamed, fearful, powerless and alone found new life. Those invested in making money and staying important rejected him. Jesus said a lot of things that all boiled down to this. Love one another (John 13.34). Everything he did came from his love for us. Everything he said was to stir up this love in others. Jesus knew that this world would not surrender to God's way or will. So he went to the cross so that everything might change.

the sacrifice

Jesus' work on the cross is viewed by Christians as a sacrifice. Some view this sacrifice as about purity, safety, substitution and exchange. They see the Father as demanding holiness whereby failure means death. Jesus died in our place as our substitute. As Jesus took our punishment we can be forgiven and enter into God's eternal kingdom.

Other Christians view Jesus' sacrifice in terms of health, wholeness, solidarity and transformation. Jesus allowed himself to be arrested, maligned and lynched by a world that had become sick. Jesus died in order to bring healing. By dying on the cross God knew what it's like to be human by experiencing betrayal, humiliation, isolation, violence and death.

Only death would not swallow the Creator's ambassador for ever. Jesus did not stay dead. Humanity had done its worst. God's best proved better. Through the resurrection Jesus broke the chains of evil and death. We get to experience this transformation by becoming healthy and whole as we follow Jesus.

Endings

the Holy Spirit

The power that brought Jesus back to life was not kept bottled up. It was shared with everyone when the Holy Spirit entered our world (Acts 2).

God's living presence burst into the world setting people free from injustice and healing the wounds caused by sin. A new community began to form with the risen Jesus at its centre, as a beacon of hope and possibility.

This new community was called to clothe itself in love and embrace compassion, kindness, humility, openness and patience (Colossians 3.12-15). This community, empowered by God's living presence, broke down all manner of racial, ethnic, religious, gender and sexual barriers (Galatians 3.25-29).

The Holy Spirit is at work through the lives of baptised people to change the world. God's plan is to have everyone involved so that the whole of creation might flourish. That we get to be involved too is the best news. Ever.

God's eternal kingdom

For many Christians, God's work of salvation is about the promise to enjoy eternal life after death by escaping God's judgment and the punishment of hell.

Much of this imagery and understanding comes from the book of Revelation. Christians differ markedly in how to understand this book. It has and still can be used to scare people by threatening their existence with things that seem implausible and illogical.

We might better understand God's eternal kingdom as a coexistent reality that arrives partially in our world whenever people live with faith, hope and love. Humanity is then called to strive for justice and work for peace with help from the Holy Spirit.

The completion of God's work is assured and awaited in the future. All that is will find its home once again in God. Those things that reflected God's creativity will endure while those things that reject it will cease to be.

Ceremonies

While baptism, christenings, dedications, confirmations and receptions are all rites of welcome, they differ by allowing people and parents a range of options within the life of the Anglican Church of Australia.

Baptism is a sacrament or an outward efficacious sign concerning the forgiveness of sin and new life in Christ. This divine blessing is conveyed in a ceremony that brings about a spiritual rebirth. This rite is often considered necessary for salvation and to receive things like Holy Communion or the Eucharist, marriage, the baptism of children and funerals. Most Christian churches recognise this sacrament, irrespective of the tradition in which it was performed. It involves using water and the sign of the cross. Baptism can be done at any age, whether as an infant, adolescent or adult. They are usually certified and registered in the church where they are performed. The Rite is laid out in *A Prayer Book for Australia* (p.49) and although unrepeatable can always be reaffirmed later in life.

Christening is an older term for baptism whereby babies were given a name and welcomed into the church. It is often reserved for ceremonies with infants or those aged under 12 years old. Where an infant baptism or christening is performed, the sponsors or godparents will make promises on behalf of the child.

Dedications are symbols of faith and not sacraments. They are typically preferred in traditions where baptism is reserved for adults who make a profession of belief for themselves. From this point of view, a dedication is statement of intention made by parents towards raising a child in the faith and do not convey or bestow a gift of grace from God. As this ceremony does not bring about a spiritual rebirth or salvation, most churches do not recognise this rite as sufficient for initiation or membership. To avoid confusion, dedications will not use water or mark the child with the sign of the cross. Parents will sometimes choose this option as a way of giving their children the ability to decide about baptism at a later point in life.

Confirmation may be thought of as the equivalent of a believer's or adult baptism. They are generally performed with those who have experienced baptism as an infant. Consequently, they provide space for the grown person to understand the faith and make a commitment for themselves that was once made by their sponsors.

In some Christian traditions, confirmation is regarded as a sacrament, however the Anglican Church does not give it this status. In bygone days, confirmation was necessary to receive Holy Communion. This barrier has diminished as baptism is now widely viewed as sufficient.

Unlike baptism, confirmations are performed by the bishop with the laying on of hands. This historic practice involves praying for the Holy Spirit to empower the recipient for a life of service and ministry in the church. This Rite is laid out in *A Prayer Book for Australia* (p.83).

Reception is available for those wish to join as members of the Anglican Church of Australia but who were baptised and members of other denominations. This ceremony allow the candidate to publicly accept the doctrine and order of Anglican Church, namely the threefold structure for ministry involving deacons, priests and bishops. Like confirmation, receptions are performed by the bishop with the laying on of hands who prays for the new member to be directed by the Holy Spirit, in the service of Christ and in fellowship with this Church. This Rite is laid out in *A Prayer Book for Australia* (p.96-97).

A **renaming** ceremony is a rite of welcome for transgender or gender diverse people who wish to affirm their faith as someone with a new identity. It is an opportunity to celebrate their preferred name and pronouns, reflect on the journey of change, acknowledge support, and embrace one's true self. This ceremony may not be recognised by other Christian groups.

Baptism

the participants

There are generally four participants in a rite of welcome:

- the **presider** who conducts the ceremony who is normally a priest for baptism or the bishop for confirmation and reception;
- the **candidate** who may be of any age;
- the **sponsors**, often called God-parents, who are called to make promises on behalf of the candidate to grow in knowing God's love and faithfulness. The sponsors may be the parents, family members or friends of the candidate;
- the **congregation** or the Christian community who supports the candidate and their sponsors in keeping their commitments.

Baptisms can be arranged to occur either during a regular service with the congregation at Holy Covenant or afterwards with family and friends. While a family gathering is often more comfortable making a connection with a congregation will sustain the faith journey far better.

the commitments

Baptism involves three commitments or promises. The first and most important is made by God to love us. This love makes us whole and healthy. This love can save us from all the things that misshape and can cause us to be unwell. When our days are done, this love will bring us home to eternal life in God's everlasting kingdom.

Sponsors commit to God that they:

- turn to Christ which means learning how to follow Jesus;
- repent of their sins by turning away from all things that cause hurt and harm;
- reject selfish living by being mature enough to care for others;
- renounce Satan and evil by having nothing to do with hate, violence and destruction.

Finally, the church or God's family makes a commitment to the sponsors and candidate. Even though we may forget these commitments, God's family will receive and welcome us as children and members of God's kingdom.

Godparents

the role

It's exciting and a great honour to be asked to become a child's godparent or sponsor. It can also be daunting as the role is rarely explained by anyone.

Customarily, godparents are there to celebrate the day with the family. They might provide a gift or contribute to the day in some way by doing a reading or sharing a prayer.

In the ceremony the role of godparents goes much deeper. They are asked to make promises on behalf of a child so that they might grow in the life and faith of the Christian community. Their love, friendship, example and prayers are important avenues by which this is achieved.

Godparents will be asked to make a profession of belief which is to be shared with the child as they grow. This means godparents should be baptised themselves. Put another way, its hard to encourage someone to grow when that faith is unknown or not shared by the sponsor.

what to do next

So how might godparents exercise their responsibilities?

- **staying connected** and being present in their godchild's life, through regular visits, phone calls, or letters;
- **listening and communicating** by helping their godchild understand and live out their faith, perhaps by attending church services with them or discussing their faith journey;
- **offering support, guidance and encouragement**, especially during challenging times;
- **praying regularly** for your godchild's well-being and spiritual growth;
- **leading by example** as a positive attitude and good example does make a massive difference;
- **giving meaningful gifts** that reflect your godchild's faith or that promote their spiritual growth; or
- **sharing memories** about of your own faith journey and talk about the importance of faith in your life.

I wonder

When it comes to church and matters of spirituality, most people have questions but they don't know how or if its safe to ask them. Many feel inadequate, exposed and embarrassed because their involvement in church life has been uneven. How can we know if we've never thought about something before?

The rites of welcome are an opportunity to grow by asking questions without all the usual expectations. They are a chance to:

- explore how we belong and might yet connect in new ways or create new family traditions;
- reflect on the things we say we value and the actual values we live by;
- examine what we believe or don't believe about God.

At Holy Covenant, we encourage people to wonder. Wondering is an invitation where there are no right or wrong questions only things to be discovered. We believe that God is big enough to handle not only our emotions but our doubts and uncertainty too.

You might want to use these questions to wonder or come up with your own. These are to simply get you going.

I wonder how important spirituality is to you and your family?

I wonder what kind of good life do you hope for?

I wonder what kind of things might stand in the way of that good life?

I wonder how you might have heard God's story before?

I wonder if the way of hearing God's big story is any different?

Is there any part of God's big story that made you curious to know more?

I wonder which rite of welcome might be important to you?

I wonder how God might be speaking to you?

I wonder what you might like to become in the life of God's kingdom?

Next steps

taking the opportunity

If you want to celebrate one of these rites of welcome at Holy Covenant, here is how you can make it happen:

- think of a date that your family and friends can celebrate;
- visit Holy Covenant during a Sunday service or another time during the week to see what our church is like;
- think about whether to have it as part of the regular service or afterwards with those most important to you;
- call or email the office to schedule the occasion;
- fill out the form so all the names are correct for the certificate;
- make a follow up time to talk with the minister about why this rite is important to you;
- read this booklet again and wonder about God's big story;
- plan a big party for afterwards.

To make an appointment:

Call: 02 6251 6100

Email: office@holycovenant.org.au

limitations

While we will try to accommodate your needs, we do have some capacity constraints.

- Baptisms, christenings, dedications and renamings can generally be held at any time of the year following a Sunday service from approximately 12noon, depending on availability;
- Sunday services go for approximately 75 minutes with space for children to play and feed;
- feeding a baby either by bottle or breast wherever you are is perfectly okay during a service;
- we understand that kids wriggle, make noise and don't follow instructions;
- private baptisms, christenings, dedications and renamings generally take about 20 minutes where family members are welcome to participate in doing a reading or saying a prayer;
- confirmations and receptions require a bishop. Such events are scheduled for October - November each year.