

Why are the sacraments significant for a Christian?

Ben: Hello and welcome to the Bitesize GCSE Religious Studies podcast. I'm your host Ben Hurst, I'm a journalist and broadcaster, and in this series we'll be going over the key beliefs and practices for your GCSE exam on Christianity. And in this episode we'll be looking at the key Christian sacraments and why they are important.

Joining me across this series is Reverend Pippa White. Hi Pippa! Tell us a bit about yourself!

Pippa: Hi Ben! Thanks for inviting me. I'm a priest in the Church of England, which means I lead a Christian community, look after a parish church, and teach people all about the Christian faith. So I'm really excited to help make sense of the Christian beliefs and practices that might come up in GCSE Religious Studies.

Ben: Before we get into the details, grab a pen, some paper, or your notes app, because throughout the episode we'll cover key ideas you might want to jot down. And stay listening to the end, because there'll be a quick quiz. Right Pippa let's get started!

Ben: Before we talk about sacraments, Pippa let's talk about the different denominations that form Christianity because there are a number of different denominations or branches aren't there?

Pippa: Yes, I think that's useful. There are several Christian denominations including Anglican, Baptist, Methodist, Pentecostal, Catholic, and Orthodox. They share many core beliefs, and sometimes each denomination has slightly different ways of practising those beliefs.

Ben: In this episode, we're focusing on key Christian sacraments - and specifically two sacraments that are recognised across most Christian denominations - what are they Pippa?

Pippa: They are Baptism and the Eucharist - which is also referred to as Holy Communion or the Lord's Supper.

Ben: Now, Pippa, what is a sacrament?

Pippa: Christians often describe sacraments as something you can see and do. They might involve everyday things like water, bread and wine. Sacraments involve rituals that help express and teach what God is doing inside someone's life, which is described as "inward grace".

Ben: And different Christian denominations practise different numbers of sacraments, don't they?

Pippa: That's right. Catholics and Orthodox Christians recognise seven sacraments, which mark important stages in a believer's spiritual life. Let me run through them... Baptism, Confirmation, Eucharist, Reconciliation, Anointing of the Sick, Holy Orders, and Marriage.

One Anglican catechism describes sacraments as a "means by which we receive" God's grace, and a Catholic Catechism literally says that "Sacraments confer grace."

Ben: Ok a tricky word there - what's a catechism?

Pippa: A catechism is a book or simple guide that explains the core beliefs and practices of a Christian tradition.

These descriptions are saying that sacraments are one of the ways God shares his help and love with people.

Ben: Pippa, why are sacraments important?

Pippa: Most Christians say sacraments matter because they:

- Let people publicly show their commitment to God
- They bring the church family together as they share in them
- They remind believers of key ideas, like forgiveness, Jesus' sacrifice or fresh starts

Some Christian denominations also teach that sacraments are special moments where God supports or strengthens a person's faith.

Ben: So, sacraments are not just ceremonies, they're meaningful actions that connect beliefs with everyday life?

Pippa: Yes!

Ben: To learn more about sacraments, just search 'Bitesize GCSE sacraments' religious studies to read through the study guide on that very topic.

Ben: So, let's look at the sacrament of Baptism. Pippa, what is it?

Pippa: For many Christians, Baptism is a sacrament that marks the beginning of a person's life within the Christian community. Christians will use water, say prayers, and then welcome the person into the Church. Often the words Jesus commanded himself after his resurrection are used in a Baptism. These words are quoted in the Bible, in the book of Matthew chapter 28 verse 19 and it reads:

"Go and make disciples of all nations, baptising them in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit."

This is called the Great Commission.

Ben: Christians can be baptised at different stages of life, can't they? As babies, young people or adults.

Pippa: Yes. I've baptised people of all ages! Right from a tiny baby all the way up to someone who was in their late 60s, and lots of people in-between! A baby who's born into a family of faith might be baptised as an infant, or someone might come to Christianity later in life and be baptised as an adult.

Ben: What does baptism symbolise?

Pippa: Christians believe Baptism symbolises three key ideas:

- A new beginning — Christians believe Baptism symbolises the forgiveness of sins and the start of a new life with God
- Belonging to the Christian community — joining the family of believers
- And following Jesus' example — because Jesus was baptised and taught his followers to baptise others

Ben: And is Baptism often a big celebration?

Pippa: Yes! In many churches, including mine, families invite friends, take photos, and sometimes have a gathering or meal afterwards. It's a joyful moment marking a big step in a Christian's life.

Ben: We talked about the different denominations within Christianity - for example - Anglican, Protestant, Catholic - do they all baptise in the same way?

Pippa: No, they don't and it's useful to know two main approaches to Baptism.

Infant Baptism is common in Anglican, Methodist, and Catholic churches. In an infant baptism, a baby is baptised with water. Their family promises to raise them in the Christian faith.

And there's Believer's Baptism - a common ceremony in Baptist and many Evangelical denominations. This is where a young person or adult chooses to be baptised and is then fully immersed in water, which represents the washing away of their sins and being reborn into the faith. This is how Jesus was baptised.

Ben: So, the meaning of the Baptism is the same, but they happen at different stages in a person's life?

Pippa: That's it.

Ben: Next, let's look at a second sacrament - the Eucharist. What is it Pippa?

Pippa: The Eucharist, also called Holy Communion, is a service where Christians share bread and wine in remembrance of the Last Supper. The Last Supper was the final meal Jesus shared with his disciples. This story is described by the Gospel Writers in the New Testament, such as Matthew, Mark and Luke.

Ben: And what does Eucharist or Holy Communion represent to Christians?

Pippa: The bread and wine in Eucharist symbolise Jesus' body and blood, and it reminds Christians of his sacrifice and love.

It also brings the Christian community together, because everyone takes part in the same symbolic meal.

Ben: And just like in Baptism, different Christian traditions understand Eucharist a little differently?

Pippa: Yes, and here are three examples to know and remember:

- For Protestant and Evangelical Christians, the bread and wine are symbols to help Christians remember Jesus
- For Anglican Christians, Jesus is spiritually present in the bread and wine. This is called consubstantiation
- Catholic Christians believe the bread and wine become the body and blood of Jesus - this is called transubstantiation'

Ben: Let's just repeat those words - consubstantiation and transubstantiation. I'm saying them slowly!

Pippa: Yes. For Anglican Christians consubstantiation means: the bread and wine contain Jesus' spiritual presence.

For Catholic Christians, transubstantiation means the bread and wine literally become the body and blood of Jesus, even though they still look like bread and wine.

Pippa: Ok we've covered a lot about sacraments in Christianity. Shall we see how much you can remember with a quick quiz Ben?

Ben: Yes, let's see how much I've remembered!

And you can pause this podcast - grab a pen and paper or just your notes app and jot the questions and your answers down!

Pippa: Ok these are some quick-fire questions, ready, Ben?

Ben: Go for it!

Pippa: What's a sacrament?

Ben: A sacrament is an outward and visible sign of an inward and spiritual grace.

Pippa: Yes! Ok, name two sacraments?

Ben: Baptism and the Eucharist.

Pippa: Can you name one Christian denomination that practises infant baptism?

Ben: Infant Baptism is common in the Anglican church.

Pippa: That's brilliant, Ben, and remember you could refer to Methodist and Catholic churches, too! And finally, can you remember a key quote often used in a Baptism: From the Bible, book of Matthew chapter 28, verse 19?

Ben: I've got this one. "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".

Pippa: That's it. And it's a good quote to remember for any questions on Baptism.

Ben: Thanks for listening to this episode of the Bitesize GCSE Religious Studies podcast.

Pippa: In the next episode we'll be covering why prayer is important for different Christian traditions.

Ben: And there are loads of podcasts to help you with your GCSEs, just search for Bitesize GCSE on BBC Sounds. See you next time!

Pippa: Bye!