

A few words from the Vicar

'O Almighty God, we give thee humble thanks for that thou hast vouchsafed to deliver this woman thy servant from the great pain and peril of child-birth: Grant, we beseech thee, most merciful Father, that she through thy help may both faithfully live and walk according to thy will, in this life present; and also may be partaker of everlasting glory in the life to come; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.' ('*Churching*' Service, *Book of Common Prayer*)

Last month, amongst other things, I talked about the demise of the practice of *Churching* (full title: '*The Thanksgiving of Women After Childbirth commonly called The Churching of Women*'). Many thanks to those of our readers who, since then, have kindly shared with me their experiences of *Churching* in years gone by, whether at this church or elsewhere.

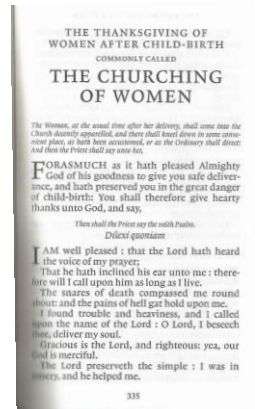
These conversations have got me thinking— a dangerous thing for vicars!

The practice of *Churching* goes back centuries and is a short, simple but wonderfully spiritual service whereby a woman would come into Church after recovering from childbirth to give thanks to God for her survival and to receive God's blessing. These days, with all the advances in medical science and midwifery we enjoy, it's sobering to recall that until comparatively recently in our history childbirth was much more dangerous for the mother than it is now. In the 1930s, for example, my own grandmother died giving birth to my mother. So no wonder the *Book of Common Prayer* (first published in the 16th Century) includes this service which gives '*humble thanks*' for the safe delivery of a woman '*from the great pain and peril of child-birth.*'

From what I am told and from my reading of the old service, for her *Churching* a new mother would come into church at a convenient time and kneel at the altar rail. The priest would then read a psalm (116 or 127), lead the new mother in a simple prayer of thanksgiving and then pronounce God's blessing upon her.

Unfortunately a lot of superstitious folklore came to be associated with *Churching*, all of it nonsense. For example, a reliable source (well, *Wikipedia*) suggests that in the UK and Ireland, new mothers who had not been *Churched* were regarded as being vulnerable to kidnapping by fairies. Also, women were considered impure and tainted with sin until such time as they were *Churched*. Hence the stories some of you have told me about shopkeepers refusing to serve new mothers until they had been *Churched* for fear of their businesses being tainted.

The fact is the origin of the *Churching* has everything to do with a desire to thank God for a woman's safe delivery and for her to receive his blessing in her role as a new mother. Furthermore, *Churching* has nothing whatsoever to do with all the superstitious nonsense that came to be associated with it or any false notions that a woman needs to be cleansed from taint following childbirth because conception is somehow sinful. Nonetheless, all that nonsense associated with *Churching* rightly led to a feeling amongst clergy and young mothers that *Churching*, as it was popularly (rather than properly) understood, denigrated



women, so the practice fell into disuse a few decades ago. Indeed, some of our readers have told me that they refused to undergo a *Churching* for that very reason.

Nonetheless, what interests me is that the common thread running through the conversations I've had with some of you is that *Churching* itself is a profoundly spiritual experience. Indeed, some even expressed the view that the demise of *Churching* means that today's generation of young mothers is missing out on something important. Birth is a miracle of God's creation so isn't it right to want to give thanks to God at this time.

Of course, it is right that all the old superstitious nonsense associated with *Churching* has been consigned to the dustbin of history. Nonetheless, I can't help thinking that, in allowing *Churching* itself to be ditched, we have somehow chucked a very special baby out with the bathwater! (Awful pun, I know!)

So, if any new mothers out there would like a *Churching*, I'd be more than happy to oblige. There is one condition, however – I don't want to hear any superstitious nonsense about malevolent fairies or suchlike!

Every Blessing

Dave