

BAPTISM OF THE LORD – A (Homily 02)

“Baptism – a New Creation”

(Isaiah 42:1-4, 6-7; Psalm 29; Acts 10:34-38; Matthew 3:13-17)

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An elder came to a missionary in China one day to say that he had no trouble understanding God the Father, and no trouble understanding God the Son, but that he was having a hard time understanding the “Honourable Bird!”

As we celebrate this feast of the Baptism of the Lord today, we are invited to see our own baptism as a journey into a new creation.

There is much to ponder about baptism as we reflect upon the readings today. The dove that descended upon Jesus, like the dove that Noah released from the ark, symbolizes the beginning of a new creation (Matthew has already used the word “genesis” to introduce the genealogy of Jesus). The Servant part indicates how Jesus will fulfill his mission as Son. Precisely as the “mightier one” who will baptize with the Spirit, precisely as Son of David and Son of God, he submits to baptism at the hands of one who is “lesser.”

Although Jesus is the Son, he is baptized in obedience to the will of God. As the Son, he is the obedient one. Already the obedience of Jesus that leads to his self-giving on the cross is anticipated. We are invited to reflect upon how obedient we are to the Word of God and the promptings of the Holy Spirit in our own lives, as baptized followers of Jesus.

The baptism of Jesus is not just about him, but also about the Church, since the two are inseparable. Just as the disciples are baptized in the name of the Trinity, so also the Father, Son and Spirit are present in Jesus’ baptism. Do we see ourselves as the Church, and not just as people who might at times go to Church, in the light of our own baptism?

Christian baptism is a matter of obedience and receiving the Spirit, and so was it for Jesus. As Christians are declared to be God’s children in the act of baptism, Jesus was declared Son of God when he was baptized. He is the Spirit-filled servant of God that Isaiah speaks of, who will bring forth justice, heal the sick and liberate the oppressed.

Jesus, baptized and anointed at the Jordan, is the promised Messiah who would be the final revelation of the Father's nature and love, and begin the reign of God here on earth, a new creation that truly begins with baptism.

The heavens open up at Jesus' baptism as the veil of the Temple was torn from top to bottom at the moment of his death. By his obedient life, death and resurrection, Jesus has opened up for humanity access to the Father that was not available before. Are we living that fullness of life that is ours by right of our baptism? Or would that saying by an unbelieving philosopher fit us that "if Christians want others to believe in their redeemer, they should act more redeemed?"

The Spirit descending on Jesus, and the voice from heaven, is the blessing of the Father upon Jesus as the Son. That blessing and affirmation empowered him to fulfill the role of the Messiah who was to come. Can we see ourselves as mandated to be sources of blessing and affirmation for others, by our own baptism?

Fr. Joe Curcio, a Scarborough Foreign Missionary, shares an incident when he saw someone truly living out his baptism as a new creation. A lay missionary from Brazil was visiting Nicaragua when he was missioned there. He invited him to come to visit one of their first farm cooperatives at one of their large parishes. When driving him back to Managua on a rough section of road, just after Christmas, the lay missionary caught a glimpse of something in the distance and asked Fr. Curcio to stop the jeep. The man rustled through his backpack, took out a pair of socks, took off his rubber boots and put on a pair of running shoes. Then he jumped out of the Land Rover and ran into the woods following a footpath. About 100 meters along he reached a man crouched under a tree. Watching closely, Fr. Curcio noticed that the man wore neither hat nor shoes. The legs of his tattered pants were rolled up and soaked with dew. He looked cold. His friend embraced him and spoke out of earshot. Fr. Curcio did not know what was said but had no need of words to hear. The man pulled out a large red handkerchief, lifted the farmer's foot, wiped it and quickly put on a sock, then a rubber boot, making sure the man's pant leg went over the boot. Then he followed the same procedure with the other foot. The farmer slackened his jaw in surprise as his friend hurriedly embraced him again and turned to go. Then he stopped, removed his denim baseball hat and placed it on the farmer's head. This caused them both to laugh heartily. In a moment his lay missionary friend was back in the Land Rover. His only reply to Fr. Curcio's smile was a firm thumbs-up for Jesus. He had spotted him in the cold and had clothed Him.

Would that we could all live out our baptism that way, the same way that Jesus lived out his baptism.

The Eucharist that we celebrate now is a renewal of our baptismal commitment, the fullest expression of our initiation into the Church by our own baptism. In it we worship the Father by offering to God the gift of his own Son given to us through the power of the Spirit.

May our celebration today renew the spirit of our own baptism within us and empower us to live within the new creation that Jesus has given to us, every day of this coming week and beyond.