

HOMILY BAPTISM OF THE LORD – YEAR B
“New Creation; New Incarnation; New Exodus”
(Isaiah 55:1-11; Isaiah 12; 1 John 5:1-9; Mk 1:7-11)

A little boy on a beach spied a matronly woman sitting under a beach umbrella on the sand. He asked, “Are you a Christian?” “Yes,” she replied. “Do you read your Bible every day?” She nodded. “Do you pray often?” he asked, and again she answered, “Yes.” Then he asked, “Will you hold my quarter for me while I go swimming?”

The little boy in this story was looking for someone he could trust, so he could swim unencumbered by care and concern.

The feast of the baptism of Jesus that we celebrate today invites us to put our faith in the Lord, to live our baptism and follow Jesus into a new creation, a new Incarnation and a new Exodus.

The baptism of Jesus first of all signals a new creation. As the dove-Spirit hovered over the original chaos and drew order out of it, the dove-Spirit hovers over Jesus to indicate that, as Jesus comes up out of the water, a new creation is heralded into existence. This new creation will be victorious over the effects of sin upon the original creation, the most powerful effect being death itself.

The baptism of Jesus also signals a new Incarnation. As Jesus enters the Jordan, he fulfils what was begun at Christmas when he was born into our sinful humanity. Now as an adult, Jesus freely accepts to identify himself with our sinful humanity. As his birth had pointed to a humble, hidden life among us for thirty years, now his baptism in the Jordan points to a very public life among sinners and ultimately to the cross.

As Mahatma Ghandi had identified with the untouchables of India and choose to stay among them when he travelled, Jesus now would identify with sinners and minister among them, calling them to faith, repentance and new life. His baptism in the Jordan was a commitment to dying for us on the cross. What began at his birth, what was deepened at his baptism, would be completed only on the cross and in his resurrection. That is why St. John in the second reading speaks of three witnesses that agree – the Spirit and the water and the blood – the Spirit of new creation, the water of baptism and the blood of the cross.

The baptism of Jesus finally signals a new Exodus. By entering the waters of the Jordan and being baptized in them, Jesus also becomes a new Moses and points to a new Exodus. As the Spirit hovered over the original creation and as the Spirit went before the Hebrew people as a cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night, so the Spirit now hovers over Jesus to indicate that he is the way to new life, to eternal life, to true liberation from the force of evil in our lives.

The statement in the gospel that Jesus *saw the heavens torn apart* alludes to the veil of the Temple that was torn apart at his death on the cross. The meaning of the torn veil is that God no longer lives in the highest of the layers of heaven as the Jews believed at the time of Jesus. Through the Incarnation of Jesus as a child, his baptism as an adult and his eventual death on the cross and subsequent resurrection, God in Jesus is now present and active in our lives here on earth in a new way that gives believers a share in eternal life.

Someone who experienced this deeper meaning of the baptism of Jesus in his life was Louis O. He visited me when I was stationed in Beauval as a young priest and shared his story with me. He was a drunk for over twenty years before he sobered up, found the 12 Steps of Alcoholics Anonymous and then went on a dry drunk, organizing Round-Ups and chairing meetings but not really working the Steps. He woke up to the phoniness he was living when he landed in the hospital, signed himself out, did a sincere Step Five confession and finally started experiencing happy free sobriety. We even prayed together before he left.

As I pondered what he had shared with me, it struck me that his story was the same as the story of Moses: slavery in Egypt, liberation through the Red Sea, a program of life (the commandments for Moses); a desert period of 40 years, crossing the Jordan and finally the Promised Land. Then it dawned on me that both stories were similar to the Paschal Mystery of Jesus: Passion, Death, Resurrection, Appearances to the disciples, Ascension into heaven and Pentecost. The stories of both Louis and Moses shared the same six distinct stages of liberation from evil and the journey to new life that make up the Paschal Mystery of Jesus.

Like Louis, we are invited to make their story, especially the story of Jesus, our story as we journey to new life through our hurt, loss, survival, acceptance of loss and forgiveness of hurt to a life of serenity, joy and justice. We are invited to make our lives into a Paschal Mystery journey to new life.

The Eucharist that we celebrate now is a sacrament of initiation that completes our baptism. It is an encounter with the liberating love of Jesus who is loved by the Father. It is above all an invitation to live out our baptism and enter into the eternal life of the Kingdom here and now.

So let us put our faith in the Lord, live our baptism and follow Jesus into a new Creation, a new Incarnation and a new Exodus.