

The Baptism of Jesus

"You are my own dear Son.

I am pleased with you."

Luke 3, 15-16, 21-22



Just a few weeks ago, leaders from around the world gathered in Washington D.C. for a funeral service to honour George W. Bush, former President of the United States who died on 30th November last year at the age of 94. What many of the mourners did not know was that, when George was hospitalized for a brief period in January 2015, he sent a message to his wife on the morning of their 70th wedding anniversary: "Seventy years ago this very day, Barbara Pierce of Rye, New York, made me the happiest and luckiest man on earth."

George and Barbara pledged themselves to each other in a commitment that changed and enriched both their lives. Yet there were probably times when they struggled, when they wondered if their commitment would last, when they questioned the values and principles that underpinned that commitment.

Today's gospel reading brings to us an invitation to ponder why it was that Jesus chose to be baptized by John and to reflect on the meaning of our own commitment as baptized Catholics/Christians. There was a time when Christians were struggling to establish themselves as a community, in the face of bitter opposition and persecution, when baptism was understood as a serious, courageous, life-changing commitment, undertaken only after a long "apprenticeship". That was an era in which Christians really had to stand in opposition to the dominant culture; a time when to be a Christian meant alienation from main-stream society; a time when the general populace ridiculed those who believed that we are all made in the image of God; a time when professing Christianity meant losing one's job, being help up to public ridicule and reduced to having barely enough to survive. It was a time when two-thirds of the population were slaves and treated as the dregs of society. To become a Christian often meant relegation to the ranks of slaves.

Moreover, the teachings of Jesus were not exactly popular in the society of first century Palestine. Loving one's enemies and praying for those intent on persecution didn't quite capture the imagination of the general populace. And almost nobody believed that there was anything wrong with exposing unwanted babies to the elements. Christianity did not fit comfortably into a society that had very different social norms and traditions. As a result, anyone considering baptism had to undergo long and rigorous preparation and scrutiny in order to qualify for acceptance into the Christian community. Baptism was a very serious rite of passage.

In the first quarter of the 4th century, Christianity flourished, with the blessing of the Emperor Constantine, and became the "official" religion of much of the Roman Empire. The result was that it became domesticated, giving Christians status in society rather than public entry into a faith community. In time it became a private affair in which belief in teaching and doctrine found was given priority status ahead of practical, compassionate action done in imitation of Jesus. Christians began to look at baptism as initiation into society rather than as a challenging event that was meant to be life-changing for all who presented themselves for this most important of all the sacraments. In time the baptism ritual was stripped of many of its meaningful symbols. For instance, as part of the baptism ritual, the priest would place some salt on the tongue of the

candidate as a reminder that he or she was to be “the salt of the earth”. That no longer happens. The sacrament was once administered in front of the whole community, after the candidate was interrogated about his/her lifestyle and her/his motives for seeking admission to the Christian community. Now, with the introduction of infant baptism, most children are baptized quietly, on a Sunday afternoon, when most parish members have gone home. The only ones to attend are the priest, the child’s parents and close friends and family members, some of whom take the role of God-parents. In recent times, the Church has designed a year-long program called *The Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults (RCIA)* in an attempt to reclaim some of the lost meaning of baptism. Still, in the minds of some parents, a Baptism Certificate is seen as merely a ticket for their child to gain admission to a Catholic school. And there are still some parents, priests and bishops who seem to put more emphasis on knowledge of the Catechism than on living the Gospel on a daily basis.

Michael Corleone, the Mafia boss in the film *The Godfather*, knew the Catechism, and pledged “to renounce Satan and all his pomps” as he stood in the church asking baptism for his son while his henchmen were elsewhere gunning down his enemies. The hypocrisy of it all can be viewed in a 90 second YouTube clip entitled *The Baptism Murders*.

Still, by living true to our baptism, we make a commitment to live the life of Christ each day of our lives - at work, at study, in our family lives and in all our other activities. So many of us have been so anaesthetized by our secular culture that our sense of Christian commitment has been dulled. Our own baptismal commitment has lost much of its significance and the baptism of children in our immediate and extended families looks much like an excuse for a party rather than a reminder to all of us of our promise to live the Gospel of Jesus to the best of our ability.

Today’s gospel account of the Baptism of Jesus serves as a reminder to us that we, too, have been baptized and thereby have committed ourselves to live as Jesus would want us to live. But let’s also look at the detail of Jesus’ baptism by John. What is described is God’s commissioning of Jesus. With a clear anointing by God’s Spirit, Jesus was commissioned to bring justice, life and love to the world. While the voice from heaven was an expression God’s confirmation of Jesus’ mission and affectionate congratulations to him for what he was taking on, we need to look closely of what Jesus was actually doing when he let himself be baptized by John in the river. It was here that Jesus demonstrated that he had the courage and resolution for the job he sensed was ahead of him. He did that by expressing his readiness to identify with sinful, struggling, fragile humanity. His presenting himself to John was a statement in action of his willingness to identify with humanity’s hopes, needs and mortality. With eyes wide open, he accepted all the implications of incarnation - of living with a human body and rubbing shoulders with people whose lives had been broken by personal limitations and the circumstances and events of human existence.

It’s all too easy to slip into thinking that he had the assistance of his divine connections in taking on his very challenging mission, or that he had been blessed with much more talent and wisdom than the people among whom he lived. But the courage, determination and persistence he showed as he went about expressing his own integrity came at a personal cost. We are misguided if we try to convince ourselves that it was all easy for him. The voice from heaven affirming: “You are my beloved, my Son in whom I am well pleased”, is not some announcement of a deal between God and Jesus worked out previously in private. It is an expression of God’s admiration for Jesus’ courageous decision to identify fully with broken humanity. Any of us who dare to apply for a job in what Jesus started is expected to respond to the same question he faced: “Are you ready and willing to embrace your humanity, with all its implications, with faith, trust and love?” We, too, are God’s “beloved”. Our baptism identified us with Jesus, named us as children of the light and commission us to step into the world as sons and daughters of God. How ready are we?