

The Baptism of Jesus, Year C

There is a special tenderness in the Readings chosen for today's Mass. After the seasons of Advent and Christmas we are entering what is termed 'Ordinary Time', during which we reflect upon Jesus' public ministry. Fittingly, the First Sunday focuses on his Baptism in the Jordan River, for his Baptism was the culmination of the thirty or so years during which he was being prepared to reveal God as a God of tender love, and reveal as well how, as human beings, we are to be open to welcome this love.

The fact that Jesus addressed God as 'Abba' indicates the intimacy of the communion with God which he experienced from childhood, but something quite special occurred at his Baptism. Jesus joined the throng, humbly seeking with them inspiration and insight into the meaning of life. What he came to experience at his Baptism was an overwhelming awareness of God's tender love expressed by Luke in words taken from the Jewish Scriptures: 'You are my Son, the One I love; my heart delights in you'. The words come from a poem, found in the Isaiah scroll, addressed to God's Servant who is to take God's message to the nations. It goes on to say:

'I have taken you by the hand and kept you;
I have given you as a covenant to the people,
a light to the nations,
to open the eyes that are blind,
to bring out the prisoners from the dungeon,
from the prison those who sit in darkness'(Isaiah 42:6-7).

We are meant to see this, too, as part of Jesus' baptism experience, for after a period of reflection and struggle in the wilderness, he began his public life as a preacher, a teacher, a healer, and above all as one through whom God's love reached out to all who were open to receive it.

To reflect more fully on this love, let us spend some time with the Readings chosen by the Church for this feast. The First Reading offers us the opening words of that part of the scroll of Isaiah that is often called the 'Book of Consolation'. The words are addressed to the people in Exile and assure them of God's special love for them, something that soon the whole world would see when the exiles returned to their homeland. God is likened to a shepherd who feeds his flock: 'He will gather the lambs in his arms, and carry them in his bosom, and gently lead the mother sheep'(Isaiah 40:11).

The Responsorial Psalm repeats the theme of God feeding his creatures. We are reminded that when we fail to see God's face we are lost and confused, and when God takes his spirit from us we 'die and return to the dust'. The psalm reaches its climax with an exultant cry of delight:

'When you send forth your spirit we are created!
You renew the face of the earth!'(Psalm 104:30).

In the Gospel John the Baptist speaks of baptism with water. He assures us that Jesus will do more than that. Jesus will share with us his own baptismal experience, baptising us with the Spirit of God. Just as the Spirit came down upon Jesus, so the Spirit will come down upon us.

Just as God assured Jesus of his tender love, so God will say to each of us at our baptism: 'You are my son, my daughter, the one I love; my heart delights in you'.

He will also baptise us with fire, for when God's love comes to us there are impurities in our heart that must be burned away, till our hearts are aflame with pure love. This is the point insisted upon by Saint Paul in today's Second Reading. Paul begins by assuring us that God's gracious love has been revealed in the world through Jesus, and that this grace is to bring salvation to everyone. In the season of Christmas we have been reflecting upon Simeon, the old man who took the child Jesus from Jesus' parents and held him to his breast, declaring with joy that at last he has seen God's salvation. Paul wants everyone in the world to share Simeon's experience, to embrace Jesus and to know the experience of communion with God in which salvation consists.

Paul goes straight on to refer to the change that must happen when we embrace Jesus and allow God to embrace us through him. Every dimension of our lives must be open to the mystery of the divine. We must cease seeking fulfilment in ways that have no reference beyond this passing world. When we experience suffering – something that is sometimes unavoidable – we must carry our cross with love, as Jesus did. Our thinking is to become wholesome by our having the mind of Christ. We are to want God's will in such a way that as soon as we know what it is that God wants of us, we set about doing it with our whole mind, soul, heart and strength. We are to live in God's presence, contemplating the face of God as revealed on the face of Jesus, and being sensitive to the presence of God in the events and especially the people who make up our lives.

Paul goes on to encourage us to be zealous in doing good deeds. Such deeds have their source in God who, through baptism, has made us his own treasured possession. We are to live the life of Jesus, saying Yes to God's desire to radiate his beauty to the world through us. Paul speaks of meekness, gentleness and courtesy. This new way of living – this living as a disciple of Jesus – has been made possible, says Paul, 'through the washing of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit which God poured out on us richly through Jesus Christ our Saviour'(Titus 3:5-6).

Today as we reflect upon Jesus' Baptism, let us reflect upon our own, praying for a deeper realisation of what it means to be consecrated to God and anointed by his Spirit. Let us also pray for those whom we have brought to the Church's baptismal font, especially if we have taken on the profound commitment of being a god-parent. Let us all, whoever we are and each in his or her own state of life, renew our commitment to carry on the mission of Jesus, living in communion with God's tender love ourselves, and sharing it with all those around us. Each day let us welcome anew God's loving embrace.