

The Catholic Parish of Petworth & Midhurst West Sussex

Fr Peter's Homily for The Baptism of The Lord (Year A) 8th January 2023

The Bishops have suggested that we use these days following the funeral of Pope Benedict to explore some of his ideas, so I thought that we might use him to guide us into the Feast of The Baptism of The Lord. Here is something that he said about baptism back in 1979, so long before he became Pope.

'Man at the moment of his physical birth is not born finished, because he is a physical and a spiritual being. Therefore, the process of his birth is necessarily a physical and a spiritual one'
(Benedict XVI 'The Light of Life' in 'Signs of New Life')

Humans are spiritual beings as well as physical ones. Life is not just biological existence, it also has a meaning, a goal, a purpose, and end. Human beings discover this goal, the reality that life is directed towards, in relation to other people seeking after meaning; we find it, together, within the Church. The human being needs more than mere physical existence – and, indeed, needs more than mere physical comfort, physical pleasures, bodily needs. We need to be completed, we need that spiritual birth that makes us whole: we need baptism.

Holding that idea in mind, lets go to today's story. There is a big crowd of people gathering around John – in fact, Matthew tells us, it is 'all Judaea' who come to be baptised by him. In that crowd stands one figure who is different. Jesus has not come from Jerusalem or Judaea (its just a short journey from there to the Jordan), he has travelled all the way from Galilee. This has been a long trip for him. This is more than just some coincidence of geography, it speaks to us powerfully of the fact that God comes searching for his people. That old image, still to be found in some religions, of a God (or gods) who is distant and remote, far from his people, is completely alien to Christianity. He travels far to find his people. As we have seen at Christmas he has left the glory and the splendour – and the safety – of Heaven behind, and he has come looking for us; in case we miss the significance of this, it is reinforced for us on today's feast, when he comes looking for us again, specifically looking for the sinners who are gathering around John.

And then there follows this strange exchange, where Jesus asks for baptism, but initially John refuses: baptism is for sinners who need to change! Baptism is about repentance – and Jesus has no need of repentance. But Jesus insists: leave it like this, it is fitting. And John 'gives in'. But this is more than just an argument won and lost. John sees something in Jesus that persuades him that he was wrong. John looks at his argument, at his way of thinking; and he looks at what Jesus says – in essence, an act of shocking humility – and after looking at the two he decides to abandon his idea, and accept Jesus' idea instead. This is what we call 'conversion': to give up on my idea, on thinking I know best, and to accept the divine idea instead. If, for me, Christianity simply becomes doing what I like, what I think best, and never accepting that I might be wrong, that I might have to give up my highly cherished clever thoughts and accept God's instead, than I haven't yet understood the message of Christ. John shows us the way. He gives in to the will of Jesus. How often do we fight this, and insist that we know best? But, as Benedict told us, we were not born finished. Our own clever ideas may be very clever indeed, but unless they have passed through the lens of God's will, the cleverness is all in vain.

And then, because Jesus has insisted on Baptism, insisted on standing with the sinner, because John has been converted and accepted the divine will, the next extraordinary thing happens. The heavens open, the Spirit is made known, and the voice of the Father speaks: 'This is the one in whom I find my delight'. The Father's delight in Jesus flows from his humility, his gift of himself, and his steadfast insistence that not only will he *be* the Son of God, but he will *act* as the Son of God, love as the Son of God, live as the Son of God. Jesus does not just give us a striking image of life lived to the full; he does not simply give us wise teachings, or powerful miracles: **he gives us a fast track to the heart of the Father.** To live as Jesus did – or, even, to try and live as he did; to commit ourselves to putting off a life that is directed and ruled by purely physical needs and desires, a way of acting that can never bring happiness, never be full of meaning, and to seek instead a new way of living that is always, in everything, however trivial, alive to the unseen spiritual world – this is to bring delight to the heart of the Father.

The crowds that came to see John at the Jordan realised that the way they had been living was not enough to make them happy, not enough to make them whole. They decided that their whole way of seeing the world was wrong, and they needed to look at it differently; and so they go to be baptised. The old way had failed. Now they will try something new. We, of course, have been baptised. The way to the Father's heart has been opened for us; but we still need to choose to follow that way. The gift we were given at baptism, the gift of a way to the Father's heart, needs to be considered and accepted afresh each day.

Might we, perhaps, in the past year have forgotten to some extent that we were not born complete, that we are spiritual beings as well as physical ones? Might we have slipped too easily into seeking life's meaning in the wrong places? Jesus has shown us the fast track to the Father's heart: to use the gifts we have been given so as to become the people we were always meant to be, the people we could never become on our own. Have we forgotten this a little? Do we need to reach out again and grasp that gift again?