

Thoughts on Baptism

The sacrament I like celebrating the most is the sacrament of baptism. It is always a happy occasion. A young child has recently been received into their family with great joy and celebration, and now they are being received again into another family, the family of the church. In being received into this family, the children become our brothers and sisters in the Lord, sons and daughters of God, and temples of the Spirit. The joy of the occasion is palpable, especially when the parents and godparents come up to the baptismal font and the water is poured over the head of the child by the celebrant. Each child is anointed before and after baptism with special oil, the oil of catechumens and the oil of chrism; the baptismal shawl is placed around the child and the baptismal candle is lit. The whole occasion is somehow uplifting in a way that is unique to that sacrament.

The vast majority of our baptisms are of children. They are oblivious to all that is happening around them. A big decision is being made on their behalf without their knowing anything about it. Yet, just as parents make all kinds of other big decisions for their children without consulting them, so parents are happy to make this particular significant decision on their behalf. There is a story in the gospels of parents bringing little children to Jesus. When the disciples tried to stop parents doing this, Jesus rebuked his disciples and said to them, 'let the children come to me and do not stop them, for to such as these the kingdom of God belongs.' Parents continue to bring their children to Jesus today whenever they present them for baptism, because in baptism they are being baptized into the person of Christ; they become members of his body; Jesus begins to live within them through the Spirit. When parents bring their children for baptism, they are making a decision for them that is very much in keeping with the Lord's desire. 'Let the children come to me and do not stop them.'

Today we celebrate the feast of the baptism of Jesus. It is a good day to reflect on our own baptism and its significance for us. The day of Jesus' baptism was a watershed in his life; it was a day of new beginning. On that day he began his public ministry during which he gave himself fully in the service of God and all of God's people. On that day Jesus launched forth as the one who came not to be served but to serve and to give his life as a ransom for many. As he set out on that momentous journey for all of us, he was assured of God his Father's favor, 'You are my Son, the Beloved; my favor rests on you', and he was empowered by the Holy Spirit, who descended upon him like a dove. Even though Jesus received the baptism of John as an adult and we received Christian baptism as children, our baptism was also a day of new beginning for us. On that day we were launched on the great adventure of becoming disciples of Jesus in our own time. On that day, we too, like Jesus, were given an assurance of God's love and favor, and we too were empowered by the Holy Spirit for the journey that lay before us. On that day we were caught up into Jesus' own very special relationship with God and we became a member of Jesus' family of disciples, the church. It is a momentous occasion that has the potential to shape our lives in a very fundamental way, in a way that is in keeping with God's purpose for our lives.

In a sense we spend the rest of our lives trying to catch up with that day of new beginning. We are baptized as children, but it is as adults that we confirm our baptism for ourselves. It is as adults that we say our own adult 'yes' to the Lord who said 'yes' to us as young children on the day of our baptism. It may be in our late twenties or our thirties or forties or even later that we come to say that 'yes' with all our heart and soul and mind. It is often in those mature years that we can hear the call of Isaiah in today's first reading, 'O come to the water all you who are thirsty, Seek the Lord while he is still to be found, call to him while he is still near.' The Lord keeps calling out to us from the moment of our baptism, and as the Lord declares in that first reading, 'the word that goes from my mouth does not return to me empty, without carrying out my will and succeeding in what it was sent to do.' Our response to the Lord's call, the Lord's word, can be slow in coming, but his call, his word, remains powerfully creative and will in some way or other make of us what God wants for us.