

Baptism of the Lord

“Take a good look at my servant. I’m backing him to the hilt. He’s the one I chose and I couldn’t be more pleased with him.”
Isaiah 42, 1-2

Jesus came up from the water and behold, the heavens were opened for him, and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and coming upon him. And a voice came from the heavens, saying, “This is my beloved Son with whom I am well pleased.”
Matthew 3, 13-17



In today’s gospel reading, Matthew gives us his account of the events surrounding the baptism of Jesus by John. Matthew simply wants to make the point that God was giving the stamp of approval to the direction in which Jesus had chosen to go in his life and ministry. Jesus sensed John’s authenticity, so, like so many others, he, too, lined up to be baptized by John and to embrace the way of conversion of heart that John preached. Remember, that Jesus had accepted all the limitations that come with being human. He therefore had to make decisions about the vocation he would choose in life - what he would do and how he would do it. Like John, he chose the life of an itinerant teacher and preacher, and he signalled the commencement of that by being baptized by John. When he did that, Matthew tells us that something extraordinary happened to Jesus as a way of affirming his choice.

When we start out on our careers, we normally begin by getting together a resume of our achievements, successes and qualifications. What qualifications, we may wonder, are required when one decides to work for God? The answer is to be found in looking closely at how Jesus acted. From Matthew’s perspective, what happened at Jesus’ baptism was that he received a commission from God - he was given the responsibility of ushering in the kingdom of God, but because of his human limitation, he had to grow into an understanding of what it all meant. He did not have the advantage of “inside information” and there was definitely no nepotism working in his favour.

To make it clear to us that Jesus is fit for the task he is about to undertake, Matthew tells us of the exchange that took place between John and Jesus when Jesus presented himself for baptism: “Later, Jesus, coming from Galilee, appeared before John at the Jordan to be baptized by him. John tried to refuse him with the protest: ‘I should be baptized by you, yet you come to me!’ Jesus answered: ‘Give in for now. We must do this if we would fulfil all of God requirements.’ (Matthew 3, 13-15) Jesus made it quite clear that he would stand beside all the other people who were lining up to be baptized by John, and, in so doing, he demonstrated that he had whatever it would take for the job ahead of him. He affirmed his willingness to be identified with all those weak and struggling people who saw a need to heed John’s call to repentance. Jesus identified with both their neediness and their hope. Having entered the human condition, Jesus accepted all the implications of that, including the prospect of death. Jesus indicated that he was prepared to pay the kind of personal human price that anyone else who acts with courage and dedication has to pay.

Of course, the implication is that all of us who are prepared to throw in our lot with Jesus - and our baptism attests that preparedness - state that we, too, are ready to accept the limitations of being human and live those limitations with courage, faith and love.

At baptism, we each received a name, and that name has had a lot to do with shaping our identity as others have called us by name and related to us. We can see that clearly in the

relationships we had with our various teachers and mentors. Their knowing our names gave them a certain power over us. But as those same teachers grew to associate our abilities and personal qualities with our names, relationships developed and all kinds of creative dynamics were established between them and us.

We can see for ourselves the changes that come in relationships when people know one another's names. There have been some people in our community who, for their own personal and political reasons, have set out to demonise asylum seekers. To assist their cause, they have created stereotypes around ethnicity and religion. However those stereotypes and fears dissolve quickly once we take the step of meeting real, live people who are like us except for the fact that they have been forced to seek asylum in our country. When we know strangers by name, we begin to see that they have hopes dreams, ambitions and loves similar to our own. Once we learn a name, impersonal categories and labels evaporate and in their place we find real and warm human beings.

Back in the late 1940s when tens of thousands of displaced Jewish refugees were travelling the globe in search of some place to live, a missionary priest who was stationed in a coastal city of Burma ventured into a holding camp that had been set up for Jews while governments around the world debated about where they should be settled. He got into a routine of visiting the detainees several times a week, gradually getting to learn some of their names and seeing what he could do to bring them food and other necessities. When Christmas came around, he visited and greeted them with a cheery "Merry Christmas." One of their leaders said in reply: "Father, we mean no disrespect, but we are Jews and we don't celebrate Christmas. "I know that", the priest replied, "but it is still Christmas, and I'd like to bring you a Christmas present." "Thank you", the Jewish man said, "but we're not followers of Christ, we're Jewish." "Of course", said the priest, "I understand that, but what would you like for Christmas?" "Father, we don't observe Christmas!" came the response. "I appreciate that, but if someone were to give you a Christmas present, what would you like?" Defeated, the Jewish spokesman thought for a few moments and then told the priest that they all missed the bread and pastry that they used to have when they lived in Germany. "Good", the priest said, and went off in search of a German bakery in the city. After much searching, he found one and used all the money he had to buy boxes of pastries and bread which he duly delivered to the surprised but very grateful Jews.

When he told the story of what had happened to some of his confreres, one of them said: "Why in God's name did you do that? You know that Jews don't believe in Jesus."

"But I do. I do." he answered.

Today's readings announce the real work of Christmas. It was on the banks of the Jordan that Jesus began his ministry of peace and reconciliation. By living out our baptism, we take on the same ministry of reconciliation and advocacy for justice. By daring to be disciples of Jesus, we live in gratitude for the love of God we have experienced in all kinds of ways and we do whatever we can to mirror that love to others. The work that Jesus took on at his baptism has now been entrusted to us.