

Baptism of the Lord--"B" Cycle--2021—St. Leonard, 10:30 & online

Isaiah 42:1-4,6-7; Psalm 29:1-2,3-4,8,9-10; Acts 10:34-38; Matthew 3:13-17

I. Introduction

- A. After the Christmas bombing in Nashville, a neighbor recalled the bomber saying recently: "Nashville and the world is never going to forget me."
- B. When I read that, I thought "How sad that a man is so insecure in himself to think that he has to do something so destructive to be seen as important." And it's not true, anyway. Nashville will remember the event for a long time, I suspect, but the world will move on in a few days and most people will not even remember his name.

II. God's Beloved

- A. What a contrast we heard in today's Gospel. When Jesus comes up out of the water of the Jordan, "a voice came from the heavens, 'You are my beloved Son; with you I am well pleased.'" Jesus embraced his identity as God's Son, and the world has never forgotten his name.
- B. Most of us have also been baptized, not by John but by Christ himself, who is the main actor in all of the sacraments. And after the water bath of baptism, we heard these words: "Almighty God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, has freed you from sin, given you new birth by water and the Holy Spirit, and joined you to his people. He now anoints you with the chrism of salvation, so that you may remain as a member of Christ, Priest, Prophet and King, unto eternal life."
- C. By baptism, we become members of Christ, so God looks upon us and says, "You are my beloved sons and daughters; with you I am well pleased." Did we really hear that? Do we really believe it? Do we know who we are and whose we are?

III. The Poet's Claims

- A. The Jesuit poet Gerald Manley Hopkins has been called the greatest English poet since Shakespeare, which means I often have trouble understanding him! But listen to a couple of snippets of his writing about being claimed by God:

In a flash, at a trumpet crash,
I am all at once what Christ is, /since he was what I am, and
This Jack, joke, poor potsherd, / patch, matchwood, immortal diamond,
Is immortal diamond. ["That Nature Is a Heraclitean Fire"]

What I do is me: for that I came.
I say more: the just man justices;
Keeps grace: that keeps all his goings graces;
Acts in God's eye what in God's eye he is –
Christ – for Christ plays in ten thousand places,
Lovely in limbs, and lovely in eyes not his
To the Father through the features of men's faces. [As Kingfishers Catch Fire,
Dragonflies Draw Flame" (undated poem, c. March - April 1877)],

- B. We are all immortal diamonds in God's eyes. We act as what we are—Christ—in ten thousand places with ten thousand faces. We are Christ in the world today. We are God's beloved. We are the face Christ shows to the world. What a calling! What a tremendous identity we have been given! The world may not remember our names forever, but the world will be changed and improved by the love of Christ we manifest.

IV. Spreading that Love

- A. Brennan Manning, in his book, *The Signature of Jesus*, recounts this story: Several years ago a group of five computer salesmen went from Milwaukee to Chicago for a regional sales convention. All were married and each assured his wife he would return home in ample time for dinner. The sales meeting ran late and the five scurried out of the building and ran toward the train station. A whistle blew, signaling the imminent departure of the train. As the salesmen raced through the terminal, one of them inadvertently kicked over a slender table on which rested a basket of apples. A ten year old boy was selling apples to pay for his books and clothes for school. With a sigh of relief, the five clambered aboard the train, but the last felt a twinge of compassion for the boy whose apple stand had been overturned. He asked one of the group to call his wife and tell her he would be a couple of hours late. He returned to the terminal and later remarked that he was glad he did. The ten year old boy was blind. The salesman saw the apples scattered all over the floor. As he gathered them up, he noticed that several were bruised or split. Reaching into his pocket, he said to the boy, "Here's twenty dollars for the apples we damaged. I hope we didn't spoil your day. God bless you." As the salesman started to walk away, the blind boy called after him and asked, "Are you Jesus?"
- B. Wouldn't it be wonderful to hear someone ask you that question? Wouldn't that affirm your deepest identity as the beloved child of God? That's how we are called to live, because that is who we are, our deepest identity.
- C. Fr. Ron Rolheiser writes about the challenge of preaching: "The older I get, the more I realize that there is a huge difference between speaking effectively, perhaps even brilliantly, and actually changing anybody's life. It's one thing to impress a person, move a heart, inspire someone, reveal the depth of some truth, help someone to understand himself or herself more deeply, or to teach and minister in a way that brings admiration. No small thing. But it's something else, something much more difficult, to move someone in such a way that he or she actually changes and gives up the habits, compensations, addictions, indulgences, fears, and angers that stand between him and her and the joy of being a saint." (liturgy.slu.edu, Jan. 10, 2021)

V. Conclusion

- A. What struck me most in that passage was the last phrase: "the joy of being a saint." That's what I want for every one of you—to know that joy in your life, to know that you are being the person God created you to be, to know that you are living as God's beloved son or daughter and revealing the face of Christ to those around you. What more could we wish than to be such people? What greater accolade could others bestow on us than to call us God's sons and daughters?
- B. In his reflection on New Year's Eve, Pat Marrin wrote: "During [Christ's] life he demonstrated what the Imago Dei, the divine image imprinted on us at creation, looks like when embodied in an authentic human person. The Gospel he preached was not a new or heroic way of life, but the basic user's manual for an ordinary human life as God intended it. If we live as Jesus did, we will find the joy and peace that comes naturally from living in balance and right relationship with creation, God and one another." (*Pencil Preaching*, NCR online)
- C. That sounds like a pretty good New Year's resolution for all of us.