Dear Friends,

Baptism of the Lord – blueprint for our human excellence

Today marks the formal end of the Church’s Christmas season. Jesus’ birth into earthly life has now been sufficiently celebrated. His public life comes next and his baptism begins it, even though the vestment color is still white.

George Caird in his Pelican commentary on the Gospel of Luke asked this question, “Why was Jesus baptized?” The New Catechism of the Catholic Church says, “The fruit of baptism or baptismal grace is a rich reality that includes the forgiveness of original sin and personal sins, birth into the new life by which man becomes an adoptive son of the Father, a member of Christ’s Body and a temple of the Holy Spirit,” (CCC no. 1279). The New Testament of the Bible is very consistent also that Jesus has no sins of his own to confess.

Caird writes: “Jesus went to be baptized then, not for private reasons, but as a man with a public calling. John the Baptist had summoned all Israel to repentance and with Israel, Jesus too, must go. Jesus dwelt in the midst of a sinful people and could not separate himself from them. Rather, he must be fully identified with them in their movement towards God.”

In other words, baptism was not necessary for Jesus Christ. He was always God’s beloved Son on whom His favor rests. And yet He chose to be baptized to identify Himself with our need for forgiveness and with our longing for redemption. To lead us into the kingdom, He himself would enter by the same and only door open to us, the door of baptism and which also the door to other sacraments. It is not only a special irony. It is a central image of the redemptive mystery. Jesus enters into radical solidarity with all men and women, taking upon himself even the condition of our sinfulness, himself having not sinned. The “one mightier” assumes the position of weakness. It is precisely in this that he is beloved. And it is from this baptism sign that he is sent.

He was like us in all things but sin, the author of Hebrews reminds us when discussing Jesus’ high priesthood. And yet we balk at the statement. “If he did not sin, how could he really be like us? How could he be fully human? We misunderstand this because we misunderstand our humanity as well as our sin. Christ has come not only to reveal divinity to us; he has come to reveal us to ourselves. Not only is he truly God. He is truly human. And he is truly human precisely because he does not sin. All of our sin is nothing other than the rejection of the truth of our humanity. Jesus’ utter acceptance of our humanity, his drinking of our cup fully, his sharing of our wounded condition, reverses our sinful rejection of our creaturiness.

His baptism, then, is at the heart of his mission to heal us. He enters even the wounds of our self-rejection, without having made the rejection himself. He accepts full solidarity with us even if it means being seen as sinner. Jesus’ baptism is one of his earliest great transformations of our human condition. The first was that the Word itself could take human flesh. All the further implications would follow: that he would be tempted to reject this mission of transformation; that he would undertake all manner of healing and disarming of devils; that he would announce a kingdom to transmute all blindness, poverty, imprisonment, and darkness; that he would, at last, suffer the very fate of sin in death. In feeing us from sin he communicates God’s grace in the sacraments he established. Sacraments are like signposts and inns of healing and solace on our pilgrim journey to our destination.

Just as we now baptize our children to announce a new fate for the human body, the baptism of Jesus is the inauguration of that fate. Announced as sinner, wholly one with our condition, Jesus, hovered over by the very spirit of God, is gazed upon by the Father who sent him and who now says to him and all of us who share his flesh—“This is my beloved, in whom I am well pleased.” Can we repeat this ‘mantra’ to ourselves, our children and family to remind us to walk the higher path, the path of holiness — path of the beloved!

Be blessed.

Fr. Tom Kunnel C.O.

January 9, 2022
WORSHIP & MEDITATION

GOD CLAIMS US AS HIS OWN

FIRST READING
Then the glory of the LORD shall be revealed, and all people shall see it together; for the mouth of the LORD has spoken. (40:5)

PSALM
O bless the Lord, my soul. (Ps 104)

SECOND READING
He saved us through the bath of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit. (Ti 3:5)

GOSPEL
After all the people had been baptized and Jesus also had been baptized and was praying, heaven was opened and the Holy Spirit descended upon him in bodily form like a dove. (Lk 3:22)


GOSPEL MEDITATION
Encourage Deeper Understanding of Scripture
“We are called to live our baptism every day, as new creatures, clothed in Christ.” — Pope Francis

What reference point do you use when making decisions? Many times, impulse takes control and decisions are made based solely on emotion and desire. We all know that these types of decisions can often get us into trouble. When a person has a confident sense of who they are and a real understanding of what is important and of value, the likelihood of kneejerk impulsive choices diminishes. Baptism gives us what we need to make well informed and purposeful decisions. By this simple gesture, God claims us as His own and provides us with the identity and purpose we need to properly live life.

It is tremendously reassuring, when we truly embrace this revelation and realize that we no longer have to wonder about the purpose of our lives or struggle to find our way. The answer of who we are in God has been given to us. We no longer have to fumble around, trip over ourselves or walk aimlessly about. Issues surrounding the sacredness of life, the meaning of death, the protection of those most vulnerable, care for the weak and the poor, offering hospitality to those in search of a home, the purpose and proper place of work, how to create a just social order, caring for creation, and understanding our roles as heralds and stewards are just a few of the wonderful gifts baptism brings. When we make decisions based on things such as these core Gospel truths we really act as Christ himself, revealing to others the new creations that we are. This is how we live our baptism.

It is difficult to walk against the tide. Yet, that is precisely what baptism calls us to do. Although we are sinners, in need of mercy and far from perfection we are called to order our life and make decisions based upon the wisdom and guidance of Almighty God. He alone is the one who can claim us as His sons and daughters. Standing up for our principles will not make us popular. But who ever said Christianity is a popularity contest? Baptism calls us to stand up for that which goes against the grain of secularism. Standing in line with other sinners, we have our anchor to steady us in the tempests of life and God is very pleased. Forge ahead. There is nothing to fear.
The first reading: Isaiah 40:1-5, 9-11

The people of Israel spent sixty years in exile, as captives of the Babylonians, from about 600 B.C.E. to 540 B.C.E. The second part of the book of Isaiah, chapters 40-55, prophesies the end of this Exile and the return of the captives to their homeland. Today’s first reading begins that section. Isaiah says that God has told him to tell the exiled citizens of Jerusalem that their “sentence” is at an end, their exile is over. Isaiah reminds them plainly that the Exile was a punishment for their sins, but that the merciful God has forgiven them. The next few sentences of today’s reading describe how the exiles are to return home. They will return as a grand religious procession from Babylon to Jerusalem by their own God. To pave the way, valleys and mountains are to be leveled, and a highway created in the wilderness. The exiles in the region are coming back to Judah, and within Judah, to the city of Jerusalem, and within Jerusalem, to the hill Zion where their Temple had stood. The last paragraph presents a lonely sentry who never went to Babylon but waited in Jerusalem, always looking out for the return of the exiles. He finally sees the approach of the procession described above, and he can’t contain his joy. He shouts to the city from the highest hill, “Here comes your God with power!” This is the best known of the prophecies of Second Isaiah. Indeed, it is one of the best known passages of the Old Testament, if for no other reason than its use by Handel in the three opening numbers of The Messiah.

Of course, the unknown prophet of the Exile was not consciously thinking of the Christ-event. He had in view the restoration of Israel from the Babylonian Exile around 538 B.C. Cyrus of Persia had won his preliminary victories and the power of Babylon was waning.

The second reading: Titus 2:11-14; 3:4-7

The author of this letter wants his Christian followers to behave properly, not to earn God’s love, but in response to that love freely given. The birth of Jesus, the wise men’s discovery of Jesus, Jesus’ baptism, and Jesus’ coming again in glory are all treated in Scripture, and in our liturgy, as unexpected appearances (Epiphanies) of God among us. So the Letter to Titus applies to our Baptism and the themes of Divine appearance and the outpouring of the Holy Spirit, which is borrowed from Jesus’ own baptism. Today’s selection combines two sections, both of which we recently read at Christmas, one at midnight and one at dawn. In this passage, St. Paul teaches how God saves us by incorporating us into Christ. Among the congregation served by the early bishop, Titus, were Christians who believed they had to practice the laws of Judaism and tried to impose those laws on pagan converts to Christ. Paul reminds them that God saved us “not because of any righteous deeds we had done, but because of His mercy.” In other words, those law-driven righteous deeds don’t win our salvation, but God gives it freely. We accept that gift by taking the bath of rebirth, when the Spirit is richly poured out on us. It is this, not our observance of laws, that makes us justified (right with God) and that give us the hope of eternal life.

Gospel Insights - Lk 3:15-16, 21-22

Who baptized Jesus and why? While there is no doubt that John baptized Jesus in Mark’s Gospel, he does it reluctantly in Matthew’s Gospel (3:13-17), and he’s already locked up in prison in Luke’s Gospel (3:20). There is no portrayal of John baptizing Jesus in John’s Gospel; all we have is the testimony of the Baptizer (1:29-34). Because each evangelist after Mark, commonly accepted as the oldest Gospel, tries to tone down or erase Jesus’ baptism by John, we must conclude that the event caused a problem near the end of the first century because many were saying that John must be the greater, since he did the baptizing. By gradually removing John from the scene, Matthew and Luke elevate Jesus. But there is little doubt that John the Baptist baptized Jesus; if he hadn’t, Matthew and Luke wouldn’t have rewritten Mark’s story. Jesus presents himself for John’s baptism in today’s Gospel, not because Jesus is a sinner, but to fulfill the word of God proclaimed by His prophets. This baptism must take place to reveal that Jesus is the Christ (“anointed one”) – the Spirit-endowed Servant. “In Baptism, all are anointed with that same Spirit, made beloved sons and daughters of God. Indeed, we are Christians – literally ‘anointed ones.’” (Scott Hann). “Let it be so now; for it is proper for us in this way to fulfill all righteousness” What this means has prompted much debate. It may be that Jesus was “fulfilling” all the Scriptural prophecies about Jesus which focused on “righteousness.” It may be that Jesus was seen as validating the rite of Baptism for all future generations of Christians. Or it may be that even the Messiah could undergo a re-orientation towards perfect righteousness, and so could repent and be baptized.

“This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased” Mark and Luke have the words addressed to Jesus, “You are my Son….” But Matthew’s “This is my Son” makes the words relevant to the bystanders because they are an open testimony to the Father’s approval of his Son … and we should view “Son” as a Messianic title. The Heavenly Voice points to a relationship shared by no other. It is significant, it is “Good News,” that Jesus hears the Father’s declaration, “This is My “beloved Son, with Whom I am well pleased”(Mt 3:17), before the public ministry begins. The Heavenly Father is much pleased with His Son’s humble submission and speaks audibly and directly to him for all to hear: “You are my beloved Son, with you I am well pleased” (Mk 1:11; Lk 3:22).
Significance of Christ’s baptism:

This exalted identity of the “Son of God” revealed at the baptism is the starting point for all that Jesus will undertake—Self-giving ministry, death and Resurrection. It is because Jesus knows Who He is that Jesus does what Jesus does. As we begin Ordinary Time, we do so knowing that, in our own Baptism, God has named us beloved sons and daughters. Like Jesus, all that we undertake must flow from who we are—God’s beloved. We are called to follow in the footsteps of our Savior, Jesus Christ. This means that we, too, must humbly submit ourselves to God’s wise and loving plan for our lives. He, in turn, anoints us with the Holy Spirit that we may be clothed with His power and grace.

According to the Navarre Bible commentary, in Christ’s baptism we can find a reflection of the way the Sacrament of Baptism affects a person. Christ’s baptism was the exemplar of our own. In it the mystery of the Blessed Trinity was revealed, and the faithful, on receiving Baptism, are consecrated by the invocation and power of the Blessed Trinity. Similarly, Heaven’s opening signifies that the power, the effectiveness, of this Sacrament comes from above, from God, and that the baptized have the road to Heaven opened up for them, a road which Original Sin had closed. Jesus’s prayer after His baptism teaches us that, “now after baptism man needs to pray continually, in order to enter heaven: for though sins are remitted through baptism, there still remain the forms of sin assailing us from within, and the world and the devils assailing us from without.” Thomas Aquinas quoted as in (blog.adw.org/2016/12/on-the-necessity-of-prayer/).

Each time we dip our hand into the Holy Water font in a church to bless ourselves, we need to remember that this act is a renewal of our Baptism. The Easter vigil each year brings new Christians to the living waters. Joy is so evident in their faces. We all rejoice. The same is true when a baptism is celebrated within the Sunday liturgy. It preaches a homily by itself. We need these moments to stop and reflect. Yes, baptism is where the whole of faith comes together.