

The Baptism of the Lord (A)
(Isaiah 42:1-4, 6-7 / Matthew 3:13-17)
(08.01.2023)

Children of God, Members of the Church and Missionaries

The commemoration of the Baptism of the Lord is a privileged occasion for all of us to reflect on our own baptism, on what it means to be a baptised Christian.

According to St Peter, the first fruits of baptism are the forgiveness of sins and the gift of the Holy Spirit (cf. Ac 2:38).

The Catholic Church believes that, because our sins are forgiven and we have received the Holy Spirit, we are “reborn as children of God, incorporated into the Church and made sharers in her mission.” (CCC n. 1213). Allow me to reflect with you today on the 3 aspects I just mentioned.

The first aspect of our rebirth as children of God is highlighted in the introductory and concluding prayers of our celebration. By our baptism, we have become daughters and sons of the heavenly Father, sisters and brothers of Christ, coheirs with him.

This adoption by God does not negate the fact that we belong to a particular human family, to a culture or a country. Yet it goes deeper than all forms of human belonging and in a way challenges them all in order to evangelise them. Our truest identity is rooted in our baptism. In the sacrament of baptism, we hear again the Lord say to us: “Can a woman forget her nursing-child, or show no compassion for the child of her womb? Even these may forget, yet I will not forget you. See, I have inscribed you on the palms of my hands.” (Is 49:15-16)

And so with St Paul we are convinced “that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.” (Rm 8:38-39)

The second aspect which is mentioned in the Catechism is that our baptism does not establish us solely in a personal relationship with God, it makes us also members of a new family.

Because each one of us is a child of God, we are all sisters and brothers. By our baptism, we are one with all those who throughout the world have been baptised in Christ. That sounds quite amazing and yet it puts us in a very challenging situation because the reality is that while we are connected with people we like, we are also connected with people we like less. Some might ask if our Protestant brothers and sisters here in Northern Ireland are really our brothers and sisters. Those who are baptised in Ukraine and in Russia are both our brothers and sisters. With the examples I have just given you, it appears clearly that we may disagree with some of our brothers and sisters. Yet we should remember that we are all children of the one heavenly Father.

These past years we heard a lot about isolation and distancing due to Covid, albeit this was unfortunate, it was right that we keep our distance. Hopefully things will change positively soon. In the meantime it appears that some of our contemporaries still have a certain difficulty with the idea of moving on and reconnect with their Christian communities. Recently some people told us that they felt that they participated better in Eucharistic celebrations by staying at home and praying via the webcam link on their computer. This satisfied them more than being physically present in the church building. I respect their position. However, because of our baptism, we cannot live our faith in that way, on our own, in a private manner.

With this feast we are closing the season of Christmas and this is a powerful reminder that we are incarnate beings who believe in a God who took on our flesh and came to dwell among us (cf. Jn 1:14). We are also reminded that the major symbols and signs of our faith are concrete realities from this world: bread, wine, water, oil... These signs are eloquent and fully meaningful when they are lived and experienced together in the limited, humble human community that we form, when we are gathered together to celebrate the sacraments.

The last aspect in the Catechism is about the missionary dimension of our lives. Our baptism makes us sharers in the mission of the Church. All of us, not only those who are labelled "missionaries", are called to bear witness to the great gift we have received.

In our first reading, the prophet Isaiah is very explicit, stressing the fact that we have been commissioned: "I have appointed you as light to the nations, to open the eyes of the blind, to free captives from prison, and those who live in darkness." In the Acts of the Apostles, we read that after his baptism, anointed with the Holy Spirit and with power, Jesus "went about doing good and healing all who were oppressed by the devil." (10:38)

The point to grasp is that our baptism is not an insurance policy for an individualistic salvation, it is a gift that saves us insofar as we are with others, insofar as we do good and work at the healing of the many wounds which disfigure creation.

We are part of a wounded humanity which is marked by blindness, imprisonment and darkness. So we are sent to the world to remove from the eyes of our brothers and sisters all that prevents them from seeing how much they are loved, how much creation is beautiful; we are sent to help them emerge from the gaol of self-condemnation or from being held in the prison of the judgemental attitudes of others; we are sent to bring them a gentle light which will show them the path of life and warm their hearts when they feel sad and lonely.

Like Jesus, we are supposed to do good to all.

Today is the day for us to revisit our baptism, not only, if possible the very place where we were baptised, but above all to revisit our hearts and the whole of our lives to see whether or not we really "walk in newness of life." (Rm 6:4)

We are called do that not only for our own sake but for the salvation of the world.