

SERMON NOTES FOR SUNDAY 8TH JANUARY 2012

The Baptism of Jesus

The significance of the baptism of Jesus should be known to us all. Jesus, this time as an adult, seeks baptism at the hands of John the Baptist in response to John's call to repent for the forgiveness of sins. We accept that Jesus was sinless. Nevertheless he enters the world of men and women to engage with forces that work to break the relationship between God and humanity. The benefit of Jesus' baptism includes in the words of St Paul creation which, *"waits with eager longing for the revealing of the sons of God"* Rom 8.19.

The baptism of Jesus again reinforces what we know about God, that He is determined to work His redeeming love from within the place where you and I stand, where we have our being, as we say.

We need to remember that Jesus' baptism like our own is a response to God's initiative. God calls us to Himself and our response leads to our baptism. This in turn makes us God's children by water and the Holy Spirit. Jesus at his baptism received the anointing of the Holy Spirit and a voice from heaven was heard to say of him that he is God's Son. God was well pleased that Jesus had accepted the implicit call that John's baptism contained. Those who participated in John's baptism as did Jesus, accepted its moral content, to repent of sin, to stand apart from the world's standards, but nevertheless to work in the world to bring God's purpose to redeem the world to fulfilment.

So let us examine our response to God's invitation to be part of His family – to be His sons and daughters. To quote R.P.C. Hanson, a former Bishop of the Church of Ireland, *"God gives us the church, as God gives us Christ. We do not create the church, we receive it. It is not an institution founded by Jesus Christ according to carefully laid plans during his earthly*

ministry. It is a society of men and women called together by the Word both in the days of his flesh and after the resurrection when he comes in the Holy Spirit.”

So our membership of the church and our new life in Christ through baptism is a gift from God to us; just as the church itself is a gift from God to us. Why the gift? Hanson says that baptism and the Eucharist “*remind us that the church lives in the world of touch and sight and hearing, that God – according to the good Jewish tradition – has no difficulty and no objection to coming into contact with gross, material, physical things, with the stuff the world is made.*” Why the gift of baptism and the church? So that you and I may, with Jesus, work in the world bringing the word of life to people who need to hear it, forgiveness to those who need forgiving, compassion where compassion is lacking and justice where that is lacking too. That is why your participation in the work of the church is so important and necessary.

As an assistant curate at St Columba’s, Hawthorn, I had the task of preparing a young man suffering from Downs Syndrome. I wondered how he was going to understand the meaning of baptism and how I was to approach his preparation. Throughout our meetings I mentioned to him that baptism would make him a new creation, hoping that something in what I said would help him understand what he was about to undertake. As he was baptised with family and some parishioners watching on, as the water for the third time poured off his head he said of his own accord and with a wonderful smile on his face, “I am a new creation!”

I have never heard such testimony from anyone since, either by word or by deed.

So I am sometimes unsure just how much Christians are aware of what their baptism and membership of the church means to them and also to God. So much of the old life, the world and its method of thinking and working affect the life of the church. Where I ask is the new way of thinking, the new way of applying oneself, where is the new sense of trust and confidence in God? The biblical image that comes to mind is the one where the people of

Israel, being led by Moses out into the wilderness to a new place, a land flowing with milk and honey, are frightened by their pilgrims' journey. A journey that is hard and challenging and where the destination they have been promised is unimaginable as they look about and see nothing but desert and aridity and feel personal hardship. So doubtful are they that they cry out to be allowed to return to the old way of things and the so called 'comforts' of Egypt. I fear that this biblical image best describes how Christians sometimes react to the challenges confronting them as they are prompted by God to move from where they once were to where they are called to be and accomplish what they have been gifted to accomplish.

If our words and actions do not give witness to the new creation we have become through our baptism then maybe, just maybe, we have yet to understand the gift God has given us in baptism and in membership of His church. Maybe that is why, on some important occasions, we can be so like the Israelites who wanted to turn back to the familiar hardship of Egypt rather than tackle the uncertain journey where God leads His pilgrim people.