

# Homily – Feast of the Baptism of the Lord (B)

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*Is. 55:1-11; 1 Jn. 5:1-9 & Mk. 1:7-11 (ad libitum readings Yr.B)*

I have probably said this before, but I think there is always something of a risk in the sort of feast we celebrate today. The “liturgical logic” of the feast is clear and compelling: to close the Christmas season and to end our reflection on the mystery of the Incarnation, the Church offers us this feast of Christ’s Baptism, a feast which both closes the early, private part of Jesus’ earthly history and begins his new public ministry with the Father’s affirmation: *You are my Son, the Beloved; my favour rests on you*. Indeed, although in some senses this is a new feast in our calendar, only having been initiated after the Council’s reforms, the connection to the feast of the Epiphany had always been strong. Both the great Antiphon set for Epiphany Vespers – *Tribus miraculis* – and the Epiphany Vespers hymn – *Hostis Herodes* – celebrate three great epiphanies by which Christ is made known: the visit of the Magi, the wedding feast at Canaan, and the Baptism at the Jordan. This feast, then, provides a fitting point of “closure” to our Christmastide reflections, as we move back into the season “through the year” tomorrow.

So where is the risk I mentioned in my opening sentence? Well, in common with many of the feasts of Christmastide, we commemorate today an historical event in the life of Jesus, and it is all too easy to stop there and leave history as history. We know the event happened, we can reflect on it, and we can then walk home unchanged after Mass, happy to return to our usual routine. In a sense, this is not a new problem. Indeed, the first person who considers this directly is St Augustine. He contrasted the liturgies of Easter with those of Christmas – the former he considered as a “sacramentum”, liturgies which actually achieve a transformation in the hearts of believers. The Christmas liturgies he considered merely as “memoriae” – commemorations which could deepen our devotion and fill us with delight at God’s goodness, but with little *direct* effect in our lives. But a little later, it was St Leo the Great who saw something richer and deeper here. After his theological tussles at the Council of Chalcedon, it was Leo who began to see more clearly that Christmastide too has the character of “sacrament” which Augustine attributes only to Easter. In many of the prayers we have used in the last few weeks, indeed, we hear echoes of Leo’s theology, including in those great lines from this morning’s collect: *grant, we pray, that we may be inwardly transformed through him whom we recognise as outwardly like ourselves...* In short, all too often we can be too much like Augustine and not enough like Leo when we celebrate feasts like today’s – we can acknowledge that the events we celebrate took place *for us* in some way, but we still find it difficult to recognise that they are *about us* as well.

After such a lengthy preamble, I would just like to share two short reflections with you on today’s readings, by way of an attempt to situate us in the heart of this feast. The first is on those great words of Isaiah we heard in our first reading. He begins with that clarion call of an invitation: *Oh come to the water, all you who are thirsty...* Perhaps it seems

perverse to speak of hunger and thirst in these days after Christmas, when probably many are still recovering from festal excesses, and hoping to shed the extra pounds we've recently acquired. And yet, perhaps we do need to hear those words now. I wonder how many are actually pondering today on Isaiah's question: *Why spend money on what is not bread, your wages on what fails to satisfy?* I wonder how many are "counting the cost" of Christmas and wondering whether it was all worth it. Somehow, January always seems like a disappointment. The coming weeks and months will be cold and bleak, everything around us seems dead and bare – we long for the coming of the spring, the coming of life and warmth. Perhaps there is a clue for us in our faith as well as our human lives. Perhaps these coming weeks and months are there for us to re-discover our hunger and thirst for the Lord, our hunger and thirst for his gifts. Perhaps these are, in Isaiah's words, the days for us to "*seek the Lord while he is still to be found, to call to him while he – our Emmanuel – is still near*". Perhaps these are the days for us to recognise the fruitlessness of our merely human feasting, and to learn to hunger again for divine fruitfulness – a fruitfulness which God himself promises us in the Word he has sent forth, the Word who is Christ, the Word who does not return to him empty-handed, but with us in his embrace.

A second short reflection on the Gospel. None of us, I suppose, will remember our own baptism; I certainly don't, since I was only two days old. In a way that is a pity, since we do not live the radical experience of "disruption" which Baptism carried with it in the early Church – a radical renunciation of the old life, a radical embracing of the new path of faith, and even, for many in those first days, a radical risk-taking, since a baptismal certificate might very well be your own death warrant. Yet even our own Baptism, perhaps so many years ago, should have something of that same *disruptive* character. Those of you who have been at Mass or read the lectionary for the past days will be aware that the weekday gospels have all concentrated on episodes from Jesus' early ministry, his healing miracles, the feeding of the 5000 and so on. Likewise, in the coming weeks, the Sunday gospels will focus on those same episodes and on the calling of the first disciples. Again and again we see the same pattern – Jesus has broken into the world with a new power, he breaks into the lives of his contemporaries and disrupts them utterly. Even today, there is a tiny hint of this new disruptive force at work in Christ. For alone of all the evangelists, Mark tells us that Jesus "saw the heavens torn apart" before the Spirit and the Father make their interventions. Mark is quoting from Isaiah 64.1, that great cry of Messianic longing from the people of Israel: "*O that you would tear the heavens open and come down...*" – a cry fulfilled at Christ's baptism at the Jordan.

Perhaps for us too, alongside the hunger and thirst, there should be a new willingness to be disrupted by Christ, to be disrupted by the baptism we share with him. Perhaps we need to learn again, in these coming weeks and months, to make that cry of Isaiah our own – asking the Lord to break into our hearts, to break into our lives in a new way, to utterly disrupt us for the sake of the kingdom. That is a way of life which needs courage as well as patience, a way which needs bravery as well as perseverance. But

perhaps it is the only way. For it is only if God does indeed tear into our little lives that we will ever hear those words addressed to us: You are my beloved; my favour rests on you.

10.1.15