

Homily for January 13, 2019

Baptism of the Lord

“The Word became Man so men may become gods”.

Today we mark the Feast of the Baptism of the Lord. This Mass is one that helps us to hear at the end of the Christmas Season the reason why Jesus was born into our world. In today’s Gospel we have the story that unveils Jesus’ public ministry. We read of the Lord’s baptism by John in the Jordan River. By reading this story today the Gospel announces to us that by choosing to be baptized Jesus totally identifies with us so that we will totally identify with him.

Many centuries ago St Irenaeus spoke of the Lord’s identification with us so that we will totally identify with him when his aptly wrote:

“Jesus became what we are in order to make us what he is himself. If the Word became a man, it was so men may become gods”

In the Mass, when the priest blesses the water to be mingled with the wine he prays:

By the mystery of this water and wine, may we come to share in the divinity of Christ who humbled himself to share in our humanity.

To understand the story of the Baptism as proclaimed in today’s readings is to understand our true identity and the reason for our life in this world. Our humanity is to be lived in such a way that it is lifted up into the divinity of Jesus.

However the day in, day out living of life can affect us in such a way that we forget who we really are. We go to work, raise our kids, love our spouse, struggle to make ends meet, shop, deal with times of loneliness, depression, experience times of happiness and true community. We grieve the death of loved ones, experience serious and chronic illness. That is we live each day, of each week, of each month, of each year and much of it can seem pretty ordinary. If we think that our life is nothing more than living the daily round without a sense of life’s deeper purpose we can suffer from a spiritual dementia that leaves us forgetful and disorientated. When people suffer from dementia they so easily lose their way and live with great confusion. If, as humans we forget why we are in this world and what we are here for, we too can become confused and disoriented and lose our way.

Today’s Mass wants to stir our memory and announce to us that Jesus became what we are to make us what he is.

Think of your life this way. Imagine yourself as a living house. God comes in to rebuild that house. At first, perhaps, you can understand what He is doing. He is getting the drains right and stopping the leaks in the roof and so on; you knew that those jobs needed doing and so you are not surprised. But presently He starts knocking the house about in a way that hurts and does not seem to make any sense. What on earth is He up to? The explanation is that He is building quite a different house from the one you thought of - throwing out a new wing here, putting on an

extra floor there, running up towers, making courtyards. You thought you were being made into a decent little cottage: but He is building a palace. He intends to come and live in it Himself.”

In the Epistle reading St. Paul declares to us in theological language this same idea this way:

But when the goodness and loving kindness of God our Savior appeared, ⁵ he saved us, not because of any works of righteousness that we had done, but according to his mercy, through the water of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit.

Let me take the analogy of the house and apply it to this passage. Jesus came to us and in our baptism says:

I want to buy you. I am going to take you as you are, but I don't want to leave you as you are. I am going to begin this work of renewal and restoration that will last your whole life long and into purgatory beyond this life. Through the water of rebirth I claim you as my own house, through the renewal by the Holy Spirit I am going to be knocking down walls and doing some pretty serious renovation. I became what you are in order to make you what I am. I want you to so share in my life that I came into this world to purchase you for myself. You can no more renovate yourself then house can without contractors. But when you cooperate with me, says Jesus, I will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire.

The Catechism of the Catholic Church explains the fire of the Holy Spirit this way.

Fire symbolizes the transforming energy of the Holy Spirit's actions.

Fire always transforms what it touches. When placed in fire, precious metals are refined and purified. When we are open to the working of the Holy Spirit in our lives similarly there is a work of purifying that occurs. Again St. Paul addresses this in our Epistle:

He it is who gave himself for us that he might redeem us from all iniquity and purify for himself a people of his own who are zealous for good deeds.

The more we are receptive to the purifying work of the Holy Spirit, the more zealous Paul's says we will be to grow in holiness and good deeds. This is why our passage for today begins with him writing:

¹¹ For the grace of God has appeared for the salvation of all men, ¹² training us to renounce irreligion and worldly passions, and to live sober, upright, and godly lives in this world, ¹³ awaiting our blessed hope, the appearing of the glory of our great God and Savior Jesus Christ,

Jesus appeared so that we would know his saving power which enables us to live with such clarity and purpose each day. When this happens our baptism is not some distant memory but the sacrament influencing and informing us each day so we can be receptive to the grace of God, who in the form of a dove, reminds us that the Spirit comes down and remains in the purified hearts of the baptized.

This is what the Church proclaims to us today so that we can remember and live purposefully because

"Jesus became what we are in order to make us what he is himself. If the Word became a man, it was so men and women may become gods"