

Homily for January 9, 2022

The Candle of Faith

As we come to the end of the Christmas Season the Church celebrates the Baptism of the Lord to bridge the great season of Christmas with the beginning of Ordinary Time for 2022. When I refer to Ordinary Time, I mean the season of the year where we are not focusing on a particular aspect of Jesus' incarnation, like Christmas, The Passion or Easter. Rather Ordinary Time is the Liturgical period where we are invited to think what it means to live a supernatural infused life in the midst of this very natural world of our daily lives. Another way of expressing this would be to say that during Ordinary Time we are helped to understand how the spiritual world shapes and governs the physical world in which we are living.

What we see in the Baptism of Jesus is the realm of heaven breaking through into this world of time as the Holy Spirit descends upon the Lord at the Jordan River and the voice of the Father announces:

“this is my Son, the Beloved with whom I am well pleased”.

These words are not meant only for Jesus - they are to have significance for us as well. Through our baptism we are adopted into the family of the Father as his sons and daughters. St Luke highlights this in a particular way that is unique to the third Gospel.

Of the three evangelists who detail the baptism of Jesus, St Luke is the only one who says the Holy Spirit alighted on Jesus in bodily form. From the earliest centuries of the Church's teaching on this passage it has been interpreted this way. The Holy Spirit did not become a Dove, in the way Jesus became a man. Rather this was intended as a tangible, concrete manifestation of the Holy Spirit, what is called an apparition. Another apparition happened at the Feast of Pentecost when the Holy Spirit was imparted to the Apostles as the Tongues of Fire alighted upon them. “Indeed, St John the Baptist foretells the Day of Pentecost when he says:

He will baptize with the Holy Spirit and Fire

This does not mean the Holy Spirit became fire but the fire was a sign that the Holy Spirit was truly present to and within the early Christian Community.

What St Luke, who recounts both of the Baptism and Pentecost stories, wants us to understand, is that what occurred with Jesus and the Apostles in a sensible and visible form happens with us at our baptism and confirmation in a super-sensible or invisible form. People will sometimes say, "well Father you know, I was baptized and I didn't feel anything, you know, nothing happened, I didn't see anything, no dove alighted up me" Or even more, "I went to confirmation, I had my confirmation, and there were no tongues of fire at my confirmation. I didn't feel anything, I didn't see anything. How do I know that I actually received the Holy Spirit?" And the answer is first of all because the word of God tells you, but secondly, because God himself manifested his presence and his power in the form of a dove at the baptism of Jesus, as God the Holy Spirit; and also in the form of tongues of fire at the first Pentecost. And those accounts of those first visible manifestations are meant to lead you to faith in the invisible coming of the Holy Spirit at your

baptism and at your confirmation. As one early Church writer put, St Hilary of Poitiers (310-367):

Everything that happened to Christ lets us know that, after the bath of water, the Holy Spirit swoops down upon us from high heaven and that, adopted by the Father's voice, we become sons and daughters of God.

But here is the critical point that I want to highlight in this homily. That while everyone does receive the gift of the Holy Spirit in Baptism and Confirmation, not everyone appropriates and lives out the meaning of his or her baptism and confirmation. It can be like someone being given a scented candle, like the one I am holding in my hand. The candle is intended to burn and give off the scent of mahogany, fire wood and pine. This was a gift I received for Christmas but I only lit it for the first time yesterday. Until then it was sitting in its box, but once I lit it a warm glow and rich aroma filled my office as I wrote this homily.

My relationship to my candle is a kind of analogy for faith. In receiving the gift, I thanked the person who gave it to me, thereby giving my assent of appreciation for the gift received. But it was only when I lit the candle that I was now actually using the gift in the way it is intended to be used.

Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI said something similar about faith. It is divided into two parts. The first is mental acknowledgment, our assent. This is the recognition that I have been baptised and confirmed. But this assent is to then result in entrusting of myself to God so that I step out and walk daily as someone who affirms I am a son or daughter of God. We need to so to speak light the candle.

So how do we entrust ourselves to God that that I can experience the effects of my baptism and confirmation?

The Psalm for today would invite us to entrust ourselves to God's providential care by seeing his handiwork in creation.

***24 O LORD, how manifold are your works!
In wisdom you have made them all;
the earth is full of your creatures.¹***

We are to also thank God in providing for our daily bread.

***27 These all look to you,
to give them their food in due season.
28 When you give to them, they gather it up;
when you open your hand, they are filled with good things.²***

¹ [The Holy Bible](#) (Revised Standard Version; Second Catholic Edition, Ps 104:24). (2006). Ignatius Press.

² [The Holy Bible](#) (Revised Standard Version; Second Catholic Edition, Ps 104:27–28). (2006). Ignatius Press.

To trust in God's providence also means to have the humility to accept the transient nature of our natural and earthly life:

***When you hide your face, they are dismayed;
when you take away their spirit, they die
and return to their dust.***

In the reading from Titus St Paul inspires us to entrust ourselves to the mercy of Jesus. We cannot justify and save ourselves, the Apostle says. But when we come to know that our baptism and confirmation make possible a new way of life then we are inspired to allow for his grace to make us zealous for good deeds. This is because we believe that what the Bible says about the Second Coming of Jesus motivates us in the present experience of this physical world:

to live sober, upright, and godly lives, ¹³ awaiting our blessed hope, the appearing of the glory of our great God and Savior Jesus Christ.

As we entrust ourselves to the providence and mercy of Jesus we will then discover what is expressed poetically in our first reading from Isaiah 40, that is the Shepherd's care:

***¹¹ He will feed his flock like a shepherd,
he will gather the lambs in his arms,
he will carry them in his bosom,
and gently lead those that are with young. ³***

With attentiveness to the care the Shepherd of our souls wants to impart to us experience during Ordinary Time a deepening sense of living a supernaturally infused life in this very natural world as we give our assent to the meaning of our baptism and confirmation while entrust ourselves to God and so light the candle of faith.

³ [The Holy Bible](#) (Revised Standard Version; Second Catholic Edition, Is 40:11). (2006). Ignatius Press.