

Who (and whose) Are We?

Today we celebrate the baptism of Our Lord; quite a leap from just last week, as we recalled the visit of the Magi to the child.

Today, we flash forward some thirty years in the life of Jesus, and we find him at the bank of the Jordan, ready to receive the baptism proclaimed by John.

Which leads to the obvious questions: what is baptism and what does it mean and why do we do it?

In years past, baptism was a private affair: just the immediate family in attendance, and baptism was the moment when a child was given his or her Christian name.

Perhaps some of you recall such baptisms.

The name you received was the name that you take into eternity.

Fr. Leo Booth, an Anglican priest and a recovering alcoholic tells the story of a private baptism he did when he was still drinking.

He had a few drinks before the ceremony began.

Father Leo recalls holding the child in his arms, pouring water over its head, saying the prayers, then finally declaring in a loud voice: "I baptize you -- Daphne!"

There was a gasp around the baptismal font.

Fr. Leo has no idea why, until the mother yells out in a loud voice: "But it's a little boy!"

"Too late," he replies, "for now and forever more, his name is Daphne."

Providing us with a name is one aspect of baptism, but there is more.

Baptism is also about answering the question: "Who Am I?"

In the now well known story told by Victor Hugo, which my son calls *Les Misérables*; which you know as *Les Miz*; there is a powerful scene where the

main character, Jean Val Jean, wrestles with exactly that question: "Who Am I?"

As you recall, Val Jean was in a brutal prison for twenty years as a result of a minor crime, and on his release, learned that a paroled prisoner is not much better off than one still in jail.

So, he tears up his parole papers and creates a new identity, which is itself a crime in those days.

He becomes, over time, a wealthy industrialist and employs hundreds of people; people who otherwise would likely be starving in the streets.

Life is good until the relentless policeman, Javer, shows up in town; and he recognizes the former prisoner.

Whether by accident or fate, a man is arrested in another town and accused of being the missing Jean Val Jean: and this arrest is reported to the real Jean Val Jean; who is then forced to confront that essential question: "Who am I?"

If the man mistaken for him is sent away, Val Jean is free; but at what cost?

If he turns himself in to the authorities, all the people who depend on him will be turned out onto the streets.

It is a titanic struggle that he endures; and it ends with the realization that he belongs not to his workers nor to the law, nor even to himself: he belongs to God; and therefore whatever happens, whatever the consequences of telling the truth, whatever may happen, in the end, everything will be alright.

This gets us a little closer to the meaning of baptism, but it doesn't yet get us all the way home.

Bishop Willimon tells of giving baptism classes in the Deep South.

He reads from Paul's letter to the Roman's, where Paul says: "Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We were buried with him by baptism into death. Our old self was crucified, we have died with Christ." Rom. 6

Bishop Willimon saw only blank stares from those sitting in the class.

Desperately, he asks: "Has anyone here ever had to die to become a Christian? I know we didn't pour enough water on you to kill you when you were baptized, but did any of you have to die?"

At which point, a timid hand came up, and the man said:

"When the schools in Jackson were integrated, I thought I would die.

I knew enough to know that on the day black children went to school with our children, the world I knew was dead.

Our world was gone.

But now, my neighbor, who is black, is my best friend.

An old world died, but a new world was born." Willimon, *Peculiar Speech*, 14.

And then there is the woman who was terrified of sleeping alone in her home when her husband went on business trips.

If he left, she always took the kids to a friend's house to spend the night, so deep was her fear and anxiety.

And then her daughter died of leukemia, and ever since then, she never again was afraid to be home alone; and when someone asked what was the connection between the death of her daughter and the loss of her fear, she replied:

"Well, when you've died, what else is there to fear?

When you've had to let go of your most precious possession, what else could happen that would be worse?" *Id.* at 15.

And finally there is this.

Garrison Keillor tells the story of 12 year old Sven, who was home alone doing farm chores one cold, snowy day. Working in the barn, he heard the wind grow loud, and then, horrified, saw the family home on fire.

Running from the barn to the house, a blizzard was in full swing; it made him disoriented, and he was lost in the swirl of white.

He knew he would die.

In his panic, he ran face first into the side of the barn, breaking his nose.

He awoke hours later, tucked under the family cow, face bloodied, holding his busted nose.

As an adult, "Sven never forgot his personal confrontation with death."

Keillor says: "Having lost his life, he entered a new one with a sweet disposition.

He planted trees, raised cattle, married, had seven children, and seldom spoke a harsh word.

His nose was never set.

He pitched ten tons of hay on the day he was married; in their wedding picture he sits, smiling, his eyes bright behind his ruined beak, a man who took a hard wallop and now everything was easy for him." Keillor, *Lake Wobegon Days*, 208.

And perhaps that is the heart of baptism.

While we often speak of our faith as a slow growing process; it is just as often a hard smack in the gut: some kind a loss or injury or death; that really gets the whole journey on its way.

In ways I will never understand, it seems we need this kind of crisis, because without the crisis, we just don't develop the ability to see the new world that God invites us into.

Without a broken beak, or a broken heart, we tend to see only what is in front of our straight noses: things like jobs and family obligations and wounded feelings and what we call common sense.

It is the hard smack of death, that comes in so many different ways, that helps us, eventually, enter a world where kindness reigns, where forgiveness is the path to peace, where violence is rejected, where friendship is the norm.

It takes the death of the world we have known to find ourselves in a new world.

Baptism is the gateway into this new world; a world that God creates; the world intended for each of us since the beginning of time.

That's why you are baptized in water: it symbolizes drowning – and emerging from one life – the old one, with its prejudices and fears and anxiety; into a new life of the Kingdom.

That's why the sacred chrism oil anoints you as King, Prophet and Priest; because in baptism, you become all three.

A minister once asked a black inner city pastor why his Sunday services lasted so long, going on for hours and hours.

The reply was that during the week, his people are called nobodies by a world that values occupations or the model year of the car they drive or whether their house meets the standards of the day.

But in the Church, his people are not nobodies: they are somebody's; and not only somebody's, but God's own people.

You see, the church is intended to be heaven's colony on earth and baptism is the gate through which we might enter this sacred colony.

In baptism, we are each of us called by name and made a *child* of God.

But we are, at baptism, also called to become a *people* of God, and it is in that journey, that transformation, from a *child* of God to the *people* of God, that the fire Jesus baptizes with performs its saving role for all of us.

You heard it from John this morning: "The one who comes after me will baptize not with water, but with fire, and the Holy Spirit.

We often forget this part of baptisms power: the power of fire.

The fire that Jesus brings is the fire that burns the chaff in our lives.

The "me first" chaff – the "us vs. them" chaff; the chaff that causes us to be anxious and afraid; and as that chaff burns, we begin to discover that

despite all appearances, all will be well, that service and humility are the path to real peace; that surrendering what I want in favor of what others need is the key to God's Kingdom.

This is the baptized life.

This is baptism.

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