

FIRST IMPRESSIONS BAPTISM OF THE LORD (B)
Isaiah 42:1-4,6-7 Psalm 29 Acts 10:34-38 Mark 1: 7-11
Jude Siciliano, O.P.

Dear Preachers:

We were having brake problems on one of community cars. At the garage I started to tell a mechanic about an interior light that was out and some scratches on the right rear fender. He interrupted me, “If you are having brake problems let’s take care of that, first things first.” He was right and was more focused on the main issue than I was – “First things first.”

I can hear an echo of the mechanic’s voice in today’s gospel. Mark, like that mechanic, gets right down to business as he opens his gospel, “The beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God” (1:1). First things first. Today we are still in the first chapter of this gospel and John the Baptist is spelling out the focus of this gospel – “one mightier than I is coming.” The rest of the gospel will tell us more about this One who is coming, whom the Baptist tells us, will pour the Holy Spirit over people (“he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit”).

Mark makes sure we don’t miss Jesus’ importance and the significance of the event. Immediately after John baptizes him, the Holy Spirit descends on Jesus and he hears the voice from heaven affirming his identity. If this were a movie there would be a blast of trumpets; if it were a play, a spotlight would suddenly shine on Jesus. Mark does a similar thing – he turns a “spotlight” on Jesus with the voice from heaven. Later in the gospel Mark will introduce a similar voice at another dramatic moment, on the mountain of Transfiguration (9:7). At Jesus’ crucifixion, a Roman soldier speaks the message, “Truly this man was the Son of God” (15:39).

At Jesus’ baptism there are two familiar biblical images – water and the Spirit. We recognize in these biblical themes that go through the Old Testament, all the way back to the opening lines of Genesis – where there was also water and the hovering Spirit. Mark is suggesting that, through Jesus, a new creation is about to take place. What was destroyed by sin and disobedience is about to be restored by the coming hoped-for Messiah who brings the Holy Spirit with him.

On the first Sunday of Advent, we heard the lament from Isaiah that became our

prayer of longing, “Rend the heavens and come down” (Isaiah 64:19). Today, Mark tells us, God is doing just that, answering our prayer and coming to our aid: the heavens are “torn open” and the same Spirit present at the creation of the world, has again come upon the face of the earth.

I write this as our plane is taking off at dawn. The newspaper I bought at the airport reminds me that there is also so much pain for so many. Looking through the plane’s window I can see the pink eastern sky and the purple and pale green clouds on the horizon. Besides human misery there is so much beauty at every turn in the world. But this beautiful earth itself is damaged by our sinful excesses. Is it the smog over the city below that makes the sky color so? We need to be washed in the same Holy Spirit that descended upon Jesus at his baptism.

Today’s scriptures and feast assure us that our Advent prayer is answered; God has torn open the heavens and come upon us and also on the waiting earth. Mark makes it clear that the rending of the heavens, the descent of the Spirit and the voice itself, were personal experiences for Jesus. (“On coming up out of the water he saw the heavens being torn and the Spirit, like a dove descending on him. And a voice came from the heavens, ‘You are my beloved Son; with you I am well pleased.’”) Jesus is being commissioned; he will now begin his life of public ministry. From this point on his ministry will manifest the power the Baptist anticipated. Yet, Jesus will meet resistance from powerful forces that will eventually crush him. The confirmation Jesus received at his baptism will be a strength for him as he faces rejection from religious leaders and even abandonment by his disciples.

I didn’t hear any voices at my baptism – I was an infant. I dare say neither did those baptized as adults. But we have heard that voice many times since our baptisms, haven’t we? Whenever we were faced with choices: the easy way out or the way of integrity; the truth or a lie; an opportunity to help someone, or move on; an effort to correct a wrong or turn a blind eye – didn’t we hear an interior voice reminding us who we are by our baptism? “You are my beloved child with you I am well pleased.” Didn’t we pray for guidance to make the right choices and strength to follow through on our decisions?

At those decisive and testing moments did we turn to God for help? Were we strengthened by that same Spirit the Baptist promised Jesus would baptize us with; a Spirit that is powerful in us, recreates us and forms us into, what Genesis

describes as, God's image and likeness? Those who are called to give witness to the God of love, compassion and justice are not left on their own by God. The Spirit is given them to do their work – God's work. We can look it up: the gift of God's Spirit is right there in every book of the bible, starting in Genesis and now present at the beginning of Mark's gospel – and Jesus freely anoints us with that Spirit that was with him and now is with us.

John the Baptist promised that Jesus would baptize us with the Spirit. Baptism inaugurated Jesus' mission and Mark was reminding the early Christians, as he does today for us, that through their baptism they too were sent on mission. We are not baptized into a stay-at-home community to enjoy our gatherings, sing our hymns and say our prayers. There is too much need in the world. But, if Jesus' life with the Spirit is any clue, we too will face resistance, suffering and possibly death, as Jesus did.

The plane is about to land. We passengers have had our lives put on hold for a while; except for our private thoughts and maybe some conversation with seat companions. During the flight Mark has entered my thoughts, in fact, he has interrupted my thinking – as the scriptures frequently do. Am I willing, once I leave this plane, to again follow Jesus, the faithful Son and Servant of God? There is a lot down there that awaits me and will challenge my commitment to Christ. How will I respond? On my own – “forget about it.” But today Mark reminds us again that we are not on our own. We have been baptized into the Spirit of Jesus, a Spirit of power expressed in service that may require much personal sacrifice. That Spirit is more than enough to finish the work God has begun in Jesus and continues in us.

QUOTABLE

In Louisville, at the corner of Fourth and Walnut, in the center of the shopping district, I was suddenly overwhelmed with the realization that I loved all those people, that they were mine and I theirs, that we could not be alien to one another even though we were total strangers.... There is no way of telling people that they are all walking around shining like the sun....

I suddenly saw the secret beauty of their hearts, the depths of their hearts where neither sin nor desire nor self-knowledge can reach, the core of their reality, the person that each one is in God's eyes. If only they could all see themselves as they really are. If only we could see each other that way all of the time.

---Thomas Merton in, CONJECTURES OF A GUILTY BYSTANDER.

FAITH BOOK

Mini-reflections on the Sunday scripture readings designed for persons on the run. "Faith Book" is also brief enough to be posted in the Sunday parish bulletins people take home.

From today's Gospel reading:

On coming out of the water Jesus saw the heavens being torn open and the Spirit, like a dove, descending upon him. And a voice came from the heavens, "You are my beloved Son; with you I am well pleased."

Reflection:

John the Baptist promised that Jesus would baptize us with the Spirit. Baptism inaugurated Jesus' mission and Mark reminds us that, through our baptism, we too are sent on mission. We are not baptized into a stay-at-home community to enjoy our gatherings, sing our hymns and say our prayers. Through our baptism each of us has been called to serve others in Christ's name.

So, we ask ourselves:

- Am I aware that baptism means more than membership in a church?
- What mission has the Holy Spirit given me as a baptized Christian?

JUSTICE BULLETIN BOARD

RESPECT LIFE: BE LIGHT

"Listen, that you may have life."

(Isaiah 55:1-11)

*"It is a poverty to decide a child must die so that you may live as you wish."
(Mother Teresa of Calcutta)*

Catholic Christians are people of life who see each human person, as Jesus did, as worthy recipients of our love and protection. The Gospel of Jesus calls us to defend all life from conception to natural death. The unborn are an especially defenseless segment of the population. It is a national scandal that on average 4,000 abortions are performed daily in this country.

What can I do?

- Join the hundreds of other defenders of Life next Saturday, Jan. 17 in the annual “March for Life” (1:00 PM to 3:PM Nash Square, downtown Raleigh.)
- Support *Birth choice*, and Sacred Heart’s *Project Gabriel*, local, non-profit organizations that offer a wide range of services to women facing crisis pregnancies. Donations of time, money and of baby items (everything from clothes to car seats) are gladly accepted.
- Stay informed. Find out about proposed legislation on issues of life and death before state and federal legislatures. Contact your representatives. Let them know you are a registered voter in their district and want their support for bills which protect life. Visit the following websites for legislative updates and information:
- PRAY for an end to all practices which destroy and diminish life: war, abortion, capital punishment, euthanasia, discrimination, poverty etc.

(Submitted by Anne and Bill Werdel, from the parish bulletin of Sacred Heart Cathedral, Raleigh, N. C.)

POSTCARDS TO DEATH ROW INMATES

Inmates on death row are the most forgotten people in the prison system. Each week I post in this space several inmates’ names and addresses. I invite you to write a postcard to one or more of them to let them know we have not forgotten them. If you like, tell them you heard about them through North Carolina’s, *“People of Faith Against the Death Penalty.”* If the inmate responds you might consider becoming pen pals.

Please write to:

Jeremy D. Murrell	#094036	(On death row since 2/17/06)
Darrell. W. Maness	#0831753	(4/4/06)
Ryan G. Garcell	#0775602	(4/4/06)
—Central Prison	1300 Western Blvd.	Raleigh, N.C. 27606

ANNOUNCEMENTS

Our webpage addresses: <https://www.PreacherExchange.com>

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Thank you.

“Blessings on your preaching”

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