

I Epiphany: The Baptism of Our Lord (Annual Parish Meeting)

Mk 1.4-11

January 11, 2009

Fr. Dow Sanderson

+++

Each year, on the Sunday after the Epiphany, the Church gathers to remember the Baptism of Our Lord. For our Eastern Orthodox brothers and sisters, this is the “epiphany of epiphanies” ...a “Theophany”...a “showing forth of God.”

As Jesus comes forth from the waters of Baptism, the Glory of the Blessed Trinity is revealed: The Father speaks, the Spirit descends, and the Son, standing along side us in our humanity, is shown forth as the Messiah of God... *This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased.*

Jesus, the sinless one, goes down into the water... and not just any water...but into the Jordan River... a river saturated by the history of the Jewish people. In so doing, he is identifying himself with God’s Chosen people. He is the fulfillment of all the law and the prophets. He is the fulfillment of the promise made to Abraham and our forefathers. He is the heir of Royal David’s line...

And yet, even as Jesus enters into these very Jewish waters, he opens an even wider door of salvation. For he is not baptized by the water, so much as the water is baptized by him. Just as water became wine at Cana of Galilee by the touch of his hand... so now water becomes the universal means for the inclusion, even of us Gentiles. And all who come to Jesus through this cleansing and life-giving Sacrament are sealed by his promise, and marked as his own forever.

It seems to me that this Gospel provides a very fitting opportunity for us to reflect on our own baptisms, and on the community into which we have been called to live out our baptismal promises.

As you know, today is the occasion of our annual parish meeting. And it is a time, not just to vote for officers and hear reports from committees. It is also a time to take stock, to reflect on our past and ponder our future.

And so, if you will indulge me, there are just a few reflections and thoughts that I would like to offer. First, I am so grateful for the generosity of this wonderful community. It would be very difficult to hide from the economic realities of today’s world. We hear ominous news reports day after day: *declining markets, rising unemployment, budget shortfalls*. In such an atmosphere, it would be easy for fear to dictate our decisions. It would be easy to give in to the baser instincts of selfishness and miserliness. But that has certainly not been the case. Not only has this congregation been responsive to the needs of our institutional life, but in an amazing way, you have opened your hearts to people in need. When one of our members has suffered a crisis or tragedy, time and again you have responded with amazing love and generosity. It has been a profound blessing to witness such Christian love in action.

Secondly, I am grateful for the blessing of our corporate worship. I know that we are not a community church. I sometimes allow myself to fantasize about the little village with the parish church in the center of everything, where the angelus bells ring and the whole populace falls to its knees...

But we are not that little village. We are spread out over ten zip codes. And I am more than aware of the sacrifice of time and expense of many of you to travel, often past several Episcopal churches, driving a significant distance so that we can be together at God's altar.

Pope John Paul II called the Eucharist the "source and summit" of our Life in Christ. The very name of this parish speaks to this identity. We should never take the privilege of worship lightly.

I once had a clergyman friend who described some of his parishioners as "church sick" They were not beauty shop sick or department store sick...but somehow, come Sunday, an ill wind blew, and they were transformed into a state of lethargy.

I have sometimes kidded that the only excuse to miss mass that I will accept needs to begin with the sentence: *according to my hospice nurse...*

But the truth of the matter is that guilt is not the best motivator. My hope and dream is that each of us would grow in Christ in such a way that being absent from the Body when it gathers to celebrate the Holy Mysteries would be a great sorrow to us. And that we would have a profound longing in our hearts, not only to be weekly communicants, but more and more to avail ourselves of the offering of daily mass. Another aspect of our common life that I would like to address today is our Catholic identity. We are all members of this parish because it is like no other in this community. We are not "monochromatic"... there are certainly differences in emphasis, perhaps.

Last Sunday, as we gathered in the sacristy before early mass, Fr. Dan turned to me and said, *Is the Bishop going to sit near the pulpit?* I replied, *yes.* He then said, *Well then, I am going to move that chair that you have put out for confirmation at the late mass, because he looks "hedged in" with it just sitting there.* And so he exited the sacristy, went into the nave, and took away the chair and cushion I had just placed there five minutes earlier.

When he returned I said to him, *Dan, you have just pointed out a great psychological difference between us. Your fear of something looking bad, supersedes your fear of forgetting... and I am just the opposite!*

He replied, *Well, then, it looks like we've got it covered on both sides!*

You see, the Lord can even use our neuroses for his Glory!

No, we are not all "alike"...But even considering these subtleties, what do we mean by claiming to have a common Catholic identity? It means, first and foremost, that we reject the Protestant notion of private judgment. One of the guiding principles of Protestantism is that each believer is a priest before God, and each individual is free to interpret scripture and doctrine for himself. That works fairly well in a time when the authority of scripture is held in high esteem. But when that breaks down, it is everyman for himself, and chaos reigns.

Last summer, at the Lambeth Conference, a gathering of nearly all Anglican Bishops in the world, one of the ecumenical dignitaries who addressed the College of Bishops said to them, basically, *You have an identity crisis. You live half in a world of the Protestant Reformation, and half in a world that identifies with the Church of Catholic antiquity... Which are you going to be?*

Well, I for one cannot say how the Anglican Communion might eventually answer that question. I don't have much influence in that sphere. But each of us has a stake in answering that question for Church of the

Holy Communion. And if we chose to be Catholic, then that means we are not free to cherry pick. The Catholic faith is not a cafeteria from which we can take what we like and leave the rest. We are bound, you and I, we are under that authority of all that the church has held and believed throughout the ages, for we believe that these truths are of the Holy Spirit, entrusted to the Church, shaped by Scripture and Sacred Tradition.

This is a little counter-intuitive for Americans. We do not have a monarchy nor royal Lords over us. We live in a culture that supports our notion that we do what we want and no one can tell us how to live our lives. But it seems to me that when it is the Lord Jesus Christ who speaks, then perhaps a spirit of humility is in order.

The law of God applies to each of us equally... and by that law we are all condemned.

But the Grace of God applies to each of us equally, and even in our undeserving, we are liberated and saved.

That levels the playing field. None of us is above the law... but none of us has any right to judge another's sins more harshly than our own. That's what it means to be a true Catholic.

And finally, I would like to say a word about growth and ministry.

If you look around you this morning, it is likely that the people sitting to your left and right are newer faces in the crowd. There are more people who have joined our church in the last ten years than the number of existing members a decade ago. We have now reached the size where we can do all ministry with excellence.

And isn't that a blessing? Is there better music in the city? Better trained acolytes and lectors and ushers and altar guild members?

Yes, we are big enough to do all things with excellence...but we are not yet big enough to sustain this level of ministry without exhausting those who do it!

We were blessed last Sunday at the Bishop's visitation when 12 people made commitments to Christ and his Church. And I am delighted to say that a good number of those new members were at Pantry yesterday morning, rolling up their sleeves to put into practice what they promised.

But every member of this church needs to be in a ministry. Don't be shy in asking! It is what we are here to do! Would you like to help with meals on wheels? Barbara Burbage would be happy to talk with you. Deliver groceries or work in the pantry? Call Noel Casey or Janet Gallagher or Patsy Prioleau. But why make a long story of it? We need more altar guild members and ushers and acolytes! The work is a blessing. And it is more of a joy and a delight to serve when there are others to **share** the work.

And that means, of course, that the joyful offer to help must always be met with joyful acceptance. There is no "old boy" or "old girl" networks here. All are needed, and all are welcome.

And so, my dear friends, I think that is about all I need to say, on this blessed day on which we remember that Our Lord was baptized for us. He is that beloved Son, who through Water and by Grace and Adoption has called us into a living fellowship, in his One, Holy, Catholic and Apostolic Church. May we offer him the gratitude of our hearts, and the labor of our love.

+++ Amen