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Story of Jesus' baptism reminds us why he came to begin with

Thomas Gumbleton | Jan. 17, 2013 The Peace Pulpit

This feast of the baptism of our Lord brings to a conclusion the Christmas season that we've been celebrating, and the readings that we have today, I think if we listen carefully, we will find kind of a recapitulation, a summary of all that this marvelous, almost unbelievable feast means for all of us. First of all, we're reminded again of the extraordinary truth that God, the God who is transcended above and beyond all of creation, this God who is the source of all being, has become one like us, fully human, in every way except sin.

In fact, you might ask yourselves, "Why would Jesus be baptized?" After all, John was preaching a baptism of repentance, a baptism for the forgiveness of sin. In fact, if you look in Matthew's Gospel at the account of the baptism, John himself seems confused. Jesus arrived from Galilee and came to John at the Jordan to be baptized by him, but John tried to prevent him. He said, "How is it that you come to me? I should be baptized by you."

Feast of the Baptism of the Lord

Isaiah 42:1-4, 6-7
Psalms 29:1-2, 3-4, 3, 9-10 or
Ps 104:1b-2, 3-4, 24-25, 27-28, 29-30
Acts 10:34-38
Luke 3:15-16, 21-22

Full text of the readings [1]

Jesus tells John, "Let it be like that for now so that we may fulfill the right order." He doesn't fully answer John, but he gives a hint because Jesus, though he is Son of God, wants to follow what he calls the right order. He wants to be fully identified with us, with humans, with those who are sinners, those who are marginalized, oppressed, pushed aside. In that crowd that came to follow John and be baptized, there were people of every class, every order, every nationality.

There were Gentiles, there were Jews, there were rich, there were poor, there were soldiers, there were peacekeepers -- everyone -- and Jesus comes to be one with them, and therefore, with all of us. He is fully human, the Son of God but also the son of Mary. It's a mystery that is beyond our comprehension. We accept it in faith, that this God is one like us in every way, so he's our brother. He's our friend. He's part of our human family. He's part of our human history.

That's the mystery of Christmas. But then also Jesus came -- and this is what we learned from the second lesson today -- not for a few, not for the chosen people only. He came for all. Jesus came to enter into the human family, to bring fullness of life to the whole human family, to everyone. That's why in our second lesson today, Peter, who at first thought he should preach only to the Jews, the chosen people, thought that Jesus had come for them alone.

Peter, now directed by God, as Luke describes in this passage from the Acts, ... had been directed by God to go to the house of Cornelius. Cornelius was ready to hear about Jesus. Cornelius is a Roman, a Gentile, a non-Jew, and Peter was amazed that God has asked him to do this, but he went. God showed him the way, and Cornelius and his whole house, everyone is baptized and the Holy Spirit is poured forth upon them as Luke tells us in this Acts of the Apostles, where he says, "Peter was still speaking when the Holy Spirit came upon all who listened to the word. The believers of Jewish origin who had come with Peter were amazed."

God gives and pours the Holy Spirit on foreigners also. This is the second thing about Christmas that is important for us to recognize. Jesus came for all, not for a few. He came to enter into the human family, to be one with us in every way, and to bring the whole human family into the fullness of God's life. Finally, Jesus came in order to transform the world into the Reign of God. That's what we learn if we listen carefully to the

first lesson today from that beautiful song of the servant that Isaiah proclaims.

He says, "Here is my servant whom I uphold, my chosen one in whom I delight." Then he goes on to describe the work of this servant. "I put my spirit upon him. He will bring justice to the nations." He will bring about the Reign of God where everyone has a chance for a full human life, but he does this in a very special way. He does not cry out loud in the streets. That would be a call to arms. The servant of God doesn't do that. Instead, as Isaiah says, "He does not break the bruised reed. He does not quench the wavering flame."

This is a servant who is nurturing, loving and gentle. In the baptism of Jesus, as recorded in Luke's Gospel that we heard this morning, God says, "Here is my chosen one, my beloved, in whom I am well pleased." That's the first line of the Servant Song. Jesus would have known that song by heart. He knew the scriptures, so he would understand. This is his work, to transform the world, to make it the Reign of God where justice, peace and fullness of life come for all, are available to everyone.

Our whole universe will be transformed into the Reign of God. That's the reason why Jesus came. We, who are the disciples of Jesus, we now remind ourselves of this full meaning of Christmas. We first of all give thanks that God has become one of us. Jesus is our brother, our friend, to be with us in every way whenever we are in need in any way. Jesus has come to bring the word of God, the love of God, God's message, to all people everywhere.

We rejoice in that and give thanks for that. Also, we understand that Jesus comes with a mission, and if we are his followers, his disciples, we accept that mission as our own. Now it's our task to work with Jesus, to enter into his work to transform our world, to bring justice, peace, love, consolation and joy wherever we can, in whatever part of our life where we can share this love of Jesus. There are people who do this dramatically.

This isn't asked of all of us, but I can't get over the news that I heard, and perhaps you heard also, about the four young people from Holy Spirit parish in Grand Rapids who were on a mission to Haiti. There was an automobile accident, and four teenagers were killed. They were down there as part of the parish twinning program, a program whereby people from parishes -- hundreds of parishes in this country -- try to enter into solidarity and love and bring the consolation and joy of Jesus to people who are oppressed, desperately poor and exploited.

They gave their lives in that. Now that isn't going to be asked of all of us, but certainly people like that who are willing to go where the need is greatest, to bring the Reign of God into its fullness, they are a marvelous example for us to say we can at least do whatever we can to enter into this work of Jesus to transform our world into the Reign of God.

This is not done through power, might or violence, but through nurturing love, not crying aloud in the street calling to arms, but taking the bruised reed and bringing it to life, making the wavering flame burst into fullness with gentleness and nurturing love. Each of us, I hope, perhaps inspired by the example of these young people, will try even more to enter into the work of Jesus to make the Reign of God come into its fullness in our world.

[Homily given at St. Hilary, Redford, Mich. The transcripts of Bishop Gumbleton's homilies are posted weekly to NCRonline.org. **Sign up here** [2] to receive an email alert when the latest homily is posted.]

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