

Homily Baptism of the Lord Sunday 10th January, 2010.

Mass Readings: Isaiah 42:1-4, 6-7; Acts 10:34-38; Luke 3:15-16, 21-22.

A discussion once took place at a clergy deanery meeting concerning bats in the bell tower of one of the churches. The parish priest of the church having the problem asked what he could do and various possible solutions were presented.

"I'd just get a shot gun and blow them away while they slept," said Father Tim.

"I couldn't do that - besides it's a listed building. How could I explain great holes in the wooden beams," said the parish priest.

"Why don't you get a large black bag, go up there with a couple of parishioners, and scoop them into the bag then drive off and release them somewhere else?" suggested Father Bill.

"No, doesn't work," said Father Jack, "I know someone else who tried that and the blighters just found their way back like demons re-possessing the empty house swept clean."

"It's quite simple," Father Andrew intervened. "Just try this - it works every time. What you do is you baptise them and confirm them and you will never see them again!"

Baptism and confirmation. Are they entrance ticket or exit visa? Extraordinarily for a number of people they are the exit visa, some sort of customary rite of passage, something that is gone through in the early stages of life, a bit like vaccinations for measles or scarlet fever. Is confirmation a passing-out parade or a deeper entrance into life, real life, into adventure, passion, challenge, sacrifice, courage, into a fuller and deeper exploration of what it means to be human - into real life, into Christ's life, into growing into the full stature of His humanity, into His intense loving involvement with the Father and the Spirit, into His love for the world, into paying the price for what that means, facing ridicule and rejection, even to the shedding of one's blood? That's in fact what confirmation involves. Baptism and confirmation take us into the life of Christ.

Baptism, confirmation and the Eucharist are referred to as the sacraments of initiation. They are also the sacraments of immersion - immersion in Christ. As St. Paul says when speaking of baptism, that we die with Him, we are buried with Him, we go into the tomb with Him, and we rise with Him. For our fore-fathers they were indeed the gateway to martyrdom, and for many of our brothers and sisters in the world that is still the case. They carry the promise to bear witness to Christ; which in fact is what martyrdom means. They are the means whereby we enter *into* life not escape *from* life.

I remember once accompanying a young adult through the sacrament of confirmation, something his family didn't fully understand. The full extent of their disapproval didn't show itself until it became clear to them that he wanted to take seriously his

discipleship of Jesus, and for him that meant entering religious life. They were totally opposed to it: *"How can you do this to us, how can you waste your life like this, how can we explain this to our friends?"* Their confusion and sadness was hard for him to deal with. *"Welcome to life in the Spirit,"* I said to him. Even in Catholic families I've heard of children being dissuaded against entering the priesthood or the religious life in favour of a 'proper job.' As soon as he was confirmed things got really difficult for this young man. We have this strange idea sometimes, don't we, that life in the Spirit is full of sweetness and song. It isn't - it can be hard and lonely and painful and hugely challenging.

On the first Sunday of Lent we will hear how the gospel of Luke tells us that immediately after receiving Baptism the Spirit led Jesus out into the wilderness, to be tempted by Satan. St. Mark says Jesus was driven into the desert by the Spirit. At the river Jordan a voice came from heaven saying: *"You are my Son, the Beloved, my favour rests on you."* In the dryness of the desert another voice spoke to Him: *"If you are the Son of God, try this....."* **If you are.** The wilderness is a place of doubt and confusion. Perhaps I was wrong, perhaps I was deluded? Like John the Baptist in his prison wilderness sending a message to Jesus asking: *"Are you the One who is to come or shall we look for another?"* Perhaps I was wrong, perhaps my life was a failure, perhaps I was deluded? The desert can be a place of despair.

The Spirit leads us to the desert, the desert can lead us to despair - despair however, with God at our side, with the One at our side who in fact never leaves us, can lead us to intimacy. Spirit - desert despair - intimacy; and this intimacy leads to fruitfulness. That's the journey we are on. After Satan left Jesus, the angels we are told came and ministered to Him, and He returned from the desert full of power, power to be put at the service of freeing others.

Baptism and confirmation are the entry into a unique intimacy with God, and intimacy with God always leads to a fuller life and a greater fruitfulness. The Spirit given to us in the sacraments drives us into the wilderness. There, in the wilderness, we encounter hardship, but hardship that is permitted so as to welcome us into a greater intimacy with God. The desert is the place where that intimacy with God takes root, becomes a priority, becomes the core and focus of our life. The questioning and confusion of any desert experience is permitted by God since it can be the servant of real growth in our lives - bereavement, redundancy, illness. The Eucharist is our food in this wilderness, our food for the journey. Life in the Spirit, the baptismal life, and life in the wilderness often go together for the follower of Jesus. It is our wilderness experience that can widen the claim and influence of Christ in our hearts, and deepen our capacity to be available to Him. This is so that we can be more fruitful, more available to be a vehicle of His presence in the world, becoming in our own unique way, with Him, a light for others, sight to the blind, freedom to captives and hope for those who live in the darkness of their own dungeons.

Each of us was baptised and confirmed for one purpose so that we would become the home of the Holy Spirit, the vehicle of the Holy Spirit. For this to take root in us, to become our life's priority, which as followers of Jesus it must be, we must enter the desert where we will be purified, having to face confusion and loneliness. As we face this courageously in the strength God gives us we come closer to Him. The sole purpose of that closeness is that we might be free to own, personally and intimately, the words of the first reading for today's Mass. I invite you to go back and look at those remarkable words again, and personalise them and carry them in your heart as Christ's intention for you. Put your own name instead of "he" or "him."

"Here is Jack whom I uphold, my chosen one in whom my soul delights. I have endowed him with my spirit that he may bring true justice to the nations....."

And so on for the rest of the reading. God wants this to be about you. That's why you are here now so that you can go out from here carrying these words in your heart and living them in your life.

May God bless you in that journey of faith and love.