

Homily for The Baptism of the Lord

“I have baptised you with water, but he will baptise you with the Holy Spirit.”

✠ In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Well, we have come to the end of Christmastide, and even households like mine and places of worship like this one will soon be shedding their Christmas decorations. Now, I am a mature person, who is not put off by trivial external things, but it makes me a little sad. All right, I'm not that mature and I am still upset by trivial external things. Don't laugh, there is still time for me to improve. For now, however, the passing of things makes me sad. Like so many people, I want to hang on to the past, and if I can't do that, I try to hang on to the present. Perhaps that is why I love Proust's great work 'In search of lost time', so much. It is an elegy, a dirge for the loss of the beauty of the past, several thousand pages long. It laments the passing of things and people, the contingency of all human life, and the transitory and fugitive character of all pleasure, all happiness, all bliss. It achieves its apotheosis in a passage in which the writer steps back on a pavement in order to avoid a passing carriage and, because the difference in the level of the paving slab from which he is moving to the paving slab to which he moves is exactly the same as one in his past, in the Piazza S. Marco in Venice, he is immediately transported there, to an earlier, happier time, and the past becomes the present, freely available to him once again, not lost but found. It is a revelation for Marcel, the Proust character at the centre of the novel. He can inhabit the past, his past, at any moment through the sheer force of his imagination.

Now, I do not dispute, or seek to undermine, Proust's useful insight, but that is not where we are as Christians. We have a similar insight, but anchored to the future, not the past.

“I have baptised you with water, but he will baptise you with the Holy Spirit.”

The best is yet to come. Because we live in the power of the Holy Spirit, in the power of our baptism, we are always orientated to the future, to the coming Kingdom. It's a difficult thought, for it is hard to imagine the future as keenly as we can imagine the past, but we have a lot of help. We have the Spirit of God, leading us on, the Spirit of love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, trustfulness, gentleness and self-control. We have the picture of the Kingdom that is the mass, a vision of a world without conflict and pain, a world in which all are reconciled. We have the power of the Holy Trinity pulling us on to a glorious future. We just have to step, not back, but forward to be lifted into a

future that is a glorious affirmation of all that it is to be human under God. We just need to take that step, I repeat, not back, but forward.

It helps us to remember that the future is where God's promises are, the God who is reconciling all things to himself and who is bringing all things to fulfilment. All things are getting better, even if that process is far from clear to us now and, of course, we have to remember that as we are not there yet, we, and those around us are not yet perfect. Things are going to be a bit messy for a while.

Someone told me once that there used to be a tax regulation in Greece that VAT was payable on all building works, but not until there were finished. Unsurprisingly many recent buildings in Greece have not quite been completed, parts of them are still, ostentatiously, building sites. Messy, but tax free. The Church is a bit like that. Not yet completed, and a bit messy. It probably will always be like that until the Kingdom comes. But the Kingdom is coming, and all things will be one in God. As Christians, we live in the constant foretaste of that certainty, of that vision of the Kingdom. So, as we regretfully take down our Christmas decorations, as we regretfully take leave of those whom we lose, like Margaret, with the passage of the years, as we suffer some of the disadvantages of growing older, let us make that leap of the imagination which anchors us in the future and draws us ever on towards what Paul called, memorably, the glorious liberty of the children of God. This is the gift of the abiding presence of the Holy Spirit, this is the promise of your baptism, this is the destiny of the Church. The past is something to honour and treasure, but it is not our home. Our home is in the future, in the Kingdom of truth and life, in the Kingdom of holiness and grace, in the Kingdom of justice, love and peace. There we shall be at home, enjoying the glorious liberty of the children of God.