

Homily for 2 (A)

“It was to reveal him to Israel that I came baptising with water.”

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

This week, despite the fact that the Church is now back in green Ordinary Time, our readings continue to reflect on the theme of the Epiphany and Baptism. We all love the idea of the Epiphany, the manifestation of God’s glory and today’s Gospel shows us John the Baptist not just as the witness to Christ, but also as the person and the place where Christ’s divinity was revealed to all. He is the vector between the ancient tradition of prophecy and the Messiah. It is a moment we treasure in the Gospels, just as we treasure other important places: places where we fell in love, places where we were young, places where we were happy, places where we feel at home. Well, we should certainly feel at home in Bethany, on the far side of the Jordan, because that is where the baptism of John was raised to a higher power and became the baptism that we most of us have received, baptism in Jesus Christ.

When John baptised, something very important was happening: the prophetic Word of God calling mankind to repentance met souls who were ready to hear that word and to act on it. John’s witness bore fruit among all those who had ears with which to hear and hearts with which to believe, but his ministry was just a preparation for the baptism to come, as was the response of the faithful, a response in anticipation of the presence of God to come. The writer of John is very clear about this: Jesus, when he comes to be baptised, comes, not just as Matthew seems to imply, to fulfil all righteousness, but also to transform the very act of baptism itself. Jesus brings the Spirit into the waters of baptism and baptism becomes the sacrament that we know today – it becomes a precious place to us: a place where we fall in love with God, where we feel young in the faith, where we are happy and where we are at home. It becomes the place where we are empowered to be the people of God.

Now, some people like to make a distinction between baptism and baptism in the Spirit. They see baptism as a sort of filling out of the membership application to join the Church, and the powerful subjective experience of the coming of the Spirit as the definitive sacramental seal on the life of faith. This is untrue and most unhelpful. We come to the waters of baptism to receive the whole Christ and all the fruits, the blessings, that flow from his sacrifice for us, including the Spirit. That gift is intensified later in the sacrament of Confirmation and, for some, in the sacrament of holy orders, but the fullness of Christ’s salvific presence is brought to us in our baptisms and our gospel today

makes that clear. That is the real beginning, and the Spirit can pop up at all sorts of unexpected moments in the life of the Christian thereafter. Ordinary baptism, like ordinary time, is not ordinary at all. It carries with it all the promises of God and all the benefits of our Redemption in Christ. That's not to say of course that those who were baptised by John were just poor struggling infantry and that we have something far better without having made the same efforts. Far from it. We too must repent and turn to God so that the virtue of our baptism is not wasted. Spiritual growth still partly depends on us and if God's promises are not fulfilled in us it is our fault. But let's not get lost in the sort of talk that implies that there are clever techniques to being a Christian. Only one simple thing is required - to fall in love with God, and to fall in love with the life of the Spirit. Giving ourselves to that love is all we have to do, and the Spirit is there to guide us as our hearts journey towards their fulfilment in glory. Amen.