

The Baptism of the Lord (C)
(Isaiah 42:1-4, 6-7 / Luke 3:15-16, 21-22)
10.01.2016

You are my Son, the Beloved; my favour rests on you.

I hear those words – which are the bottom line of today's gospel passage and the core message of this feast of the Lord's Baptism – as an invitation addressed to each one of us to waken up to the wonder of who and what we are. We are – all of us – *God's Beloved child*.

That title which was given to Christ and which is given to each one of us carries within it a call for us *to allow ourselves to be loved*.

I wonder if we are ready for that to happen.

For us to consent to allowing ourselves to *be loved* we must, first of all, come to see ourselves as God sees us: as truly loveable. This is how God sees us right now: as loveable creatures, as men, women and children loved by Him.

Now, for many of us that really presents a challenge.

Is it not true that we are all inclined to find so much about ourselves that is un-loveable? We are only too aware of our many failings. We are conscious of our blemishes and flaws, we recognise our disfigurement and our sin. We can too quickly move from this kind of self-awareness to the point where we ignore all that is, nonetheless, loveable within us. We may question whether anyone who might know us through and through could still love us. We may even ask ourselves this question in regard to God. We wonder if and how God could ever love us, given the wretched and miserable, poor and needy, sinful and defiled creatures we know ourselves to be.

I would want to say at the outset that one impact of sin is to distort our vision. Indeed, our sin can altogether blind us to God's goodness and our own. It blinds us to other people's goodness as well. We are told in the story of Adam and Eve's fall from grace in the Garden of Eden how after our first parents had sinned, *their eyes were opened and they could see that they were naked and they were ashamed*. In fact, what happened then was quite the opposite to seeing themselves more clearly. The opposite happened, they were blinded to their own and each other's beauty, made as they were in the image and likeness of God. Toxic shame, crippling guilt, sentiments of lovelessness invaded their hearts. The beautiful innocence of our first parents – including their initial vision of their own beauty – was robbed from them. They no longer recognised as beautiful what had appeared to them as beautiful beforehand. They saw their naked beauty as a cause of guilt and shame rather than as a sign of blessing and wonder.

Sin robbed Adam and Eve of the sense of their belovedness in God's eyes. Sin still has that effect upon us. It robs us of a sense of our belovedness.

When Jesus was baptised, He went down into the waters of the Jordan and thereby sanctified that stream, making it a current of living waters with medicinal qualities. In that moment a process of healing opened up for fallen humanity.

Because we are baptised in Christ, this is precisely what we celebrate today: God's healing grace at work in our lives through the grace of baptism.

Our Orthodox brothers and sisters speak of the healing which was inaugurated for us here in the following lines from their Rite of Blessing of the Water. They have us turn to the Lord in prayer with this petition on our lips:

Immerse us in Your healing water ...

Make this a fountain of immortality

A gift of cleansing

A remission of sins

A healing of compulsive habits

*A destroying of demons
A renewing of our God-given nature*

If Christ's baptism has won healing for us, it has also obtained for us the restoration of our original wholeness which sin fragmented in our lives.

Christ's baptism, and our union with Him through our baptism into His life, death and resurrection thus makes sanctified afresh, re-establishes us in holiness.

Here, we can regard 'holiness' and 'wholeness' as synonyms.

An antiphon from the liturgy of the Orthodox tradition captures this idea well when it has us sing: *Christ is baptised and the whole world is made holy. He wipes out the debt of our sins; we shall be purified by water and the Holy Spirit.*

Through Christ's descent into the waters of the Jordan we are sanctified and our woundedness is salved in healing waters. With Christ we are wholly immersed in God's love.

When Jesus came forth from the waters of the Jordan *the Holy Spirit descended upon Him in the form of a dove and the voice from heaven was heard to say: You are my Beloved.* Later, the events on the Mountain of the Transfiguration would parallel this moment of Jesus' baptism. There too the Father's voice was heard to declare Jesus to be *the Beloved.*

Loved by God, called to allow ourselves to be loved by Him, with the Transfigured Christ, as the Father's beloved children, we are invited to recognise and celebrate our own dazzling beauty. The rich symbol of the white robe of baptism which is used in our celebration of the sacrament of Christian initiation reflects this idea. With Jesus, we too are clothed in light. We are called to believe that the Father sees us in the radiance which emanates from His Son, Christ our Saviour. The call for us Christians is to wake up to the wonder of our life in Christ, to the miracle we are! In God's eyes we are very good: *Behold what I have made is very good!* If only we could see ourselves that way. I believe our God in His great humility, given the trust He places in us, asks us, begs us even, to dare to see ourselves as He sees us. God pleads with us to see the totality of ourselves – all our strengths and our weaknesses, all our joys and our miseries – through the eyes of His heart which always holds us as His *Beloved.*

God can – and, if only we consent to Him doing so, God does – weave back together all the broken, wounded parts of our being into the wholeness that He desired for us from the beginning and still desires for us.

The Orthodox prayer I spoke of a few moments ago spoke of our *compulsions* being *healed.*

The promise that our compulsions will be healed is deeply important – an assurance we must not hesitate to take to heart.

Who among us can say that he or she does not need to hear that word of life?

I suspect that none of us would dare to say that we are totally free in mind and heart right now.

Compulsions of many types ensnare us. There are drives within us, not evil in themselves, but which, left untended, can become distorted and lead to addictions of all sorts, enslavement to idols, worship of false gods ... These addictions and attachments rob us of full freedom of mind and heart. Only one thing can and will heal us of our lack of freedom – and that is perfect love. *Where there is love, there is freedom.*

The word that has inspired our reflection this morning is the word, *Beloved*, with its inherent call to allow ourselves to be loved.

Love is the most healing grace a human being can know: God's love, other people's love (especially in the really significant relationships of one's life) and also a true love for oneself.

Perhaps it is this true love for oneself – which for so many, if not most of us, is the most challenging of all. We struggle greatly to love ourself as we are. We struggle to love the body that we have been given, the type of personality that is ours, the family we were born into and in which we were

raised, the education we had ... and maybe even the work we are engaged in, our community of life ... At different times one or other of these things – sometimes a combination of them – do not sit comfortably with us; we even say that we would love if it were otherwise.

Given the malaise we feel around all those uncomfortable aspects of ourselves, we frequently fall into the trap of disconnectedness with our self.

When we feel ill at ease within ourself we can so readily resort to supposedly calming, reassuring behaviours which are, in fact, nothing less than or nothing other than compulsions. Our compulsions may manifest themselves in the way we live romantic or otherwise significant relationships in our lives, the way we relate to work, to family, etc. Our compulsions can determine how we live our religious practice too. We can (and sometimes do) live our religious practice unhealthily.

So easily we develop habits and addictions that hinder us from enjoying freedom of mind and heart. Things become further complicated when we judge ourselves harshly for all this.

Even when things look as if they are going well and we are making progress, we are sometimes inclined to sabotage what is fine. We trip ourselves up, as it were. As a result of this, we then belittle and berate ourselves, we criticise and chastise ourselves for *messing things up* once again. To belittle or berate ourselves is to contradict and/or deny our belovedness.

There is surely one thing that can cure us of self-destructive ways of relating to ourselves: it is the encounter with and a heartfelt profession of faith in the merciful, tender love of our Creator God. It is only by letting ourselves be held in the warmth of His embrace that we will find inner peace, that deep serenity, that feeling of *being at home in our own skin*, for which we long.

It is as we experience the grace of God in the warmth of our Father's embrace that we come to see ourselves as loveable – and loved as we are: however broken, wounded, sinful, still not getting it right, still capable of messing up. The call is to know ourselves to be loved all the same – loved precisely *in our vulnerable, fragile, state ...* indeed, loved all the more, *because of this*.

It is love – the love of God and of significant others – that leads us to the point where we can come to see ourselves not only as an acceptable person, but as one who is as our lover sees us: an amazing being, a truly beautiful person!

I will always remember that among the last words she spoke in the couple of months of silence that preceded my late mother's death she had this to say to someone who cared for her medically: *You are a beautiful person*. By those words which my dying mother spoke so distinctly, she encouraged her doctor to see herself as God saw her. If only we could all see ourselves and others in that way: as truly beautiful people! How our attitudes of heart would change! We would soften in our own regard and in regard to others. If we were to see ourselves as God's *Beloved* we would happily reconnect with ourselves and be more trusting of others; we would more readily live in communion with God and with those around us.

So, what is the point of all I am saying this morning? What is it that I want to relay?

While I could respond to this in various ways, one thing surely goes to the heart of the matter. It is that we need to listen again and again to the words the Father spoke over Jesus at His baptism, hearing them as words He speaks over us also again and again. So also, we need to hear those words *spoken within us* and allow them to echo gently in our hearts day after day until they inhabit every breath we breathe: *You are My Beloved*.

This is what *the inner voice of love* has to say to us over and over again. If only we would listen to it: *I love you. You are loved, Beloved. Allow yourself to be loved!*

I would simply add to this reflection a word relevant to this Year of Mercy which Pope Francis has launched and on which he has embarked the whole Church.

During this Year of Mercy, I hear the Lord calling each and every one of us to develop a

relationship of merciful, compassionate love with our self. I hear the Lord pleading with us to take our cue from Him and to strive to love ourselves tenderly, compassionately, mercifully ... for this is how He loves us.

Is this then asking a lot from us?

I have suggested that for many the very idea of loving our self is a very big leap of faith. It can even feel scary, alien and unhealthy. We are just not used to the idea that we are truly loveable.

The sentiments of fear and embarrassment which we find surfacing within our hearts when it comes to the idea of caring for our self, loving our self, are perhaps the tempter's best way of holding us bound in our compulsions. To sow self-loathing in our hearts – or at least a suspicious doubt of true self-love and/or the love of others for us – is a ploy the tempter often resorts to pull us away from our truest identity, our deepest, graced well-being, as a child of God.

We need, in a spirit of faith, to keep saying: *I am God's Beloved.*

What I am advocating here is not just some facile auto-suggestion – yet another effort to convince ourselves of something that is not true. No. What I am advocating here is attentiveness to, and credence in, God's life-giving, life-restoring word. *God's word does what it says.* Our God who loves us has created us for love. Whatever love we give stems from God's own love for us. The same is true of whatever love we receive, of course. It too comes ultimately from God.

If we want to love more, we must learn to allow ourselves to be loved more. We must permit the loving gaze of God to be posed upon us. The Lord's loving gaze will lead us to lift our eyes to Him, to recognise in His regard the love that brought us into being and sustains our life day after day. We must breathe in and allow ourselves to be immersed and saturated by, the tender warmth of God's love for us.

On this day on which we remember and celebrate the Baptism of Jesus, as we think of the water bathing His human body, we think of the love of the Father cascading over Him, refreshing Him gently in its tide and covering Him with glory.

We think also of our own baptism. We see this grace as a bathing in the very life of our God who is love in Himself.

As we celebrate today's great feast we pray that we may be led to rejoice in the immense and eternal love which God holds in His heart for each one of us.

We are God's Beloved. May we never cease allowing ourselves to be loved!

Amen.