

Baptism of the Lord (A)
(Isaiah 42:1-4. 6-7 / Matthew 3:13-17)
12.01.2020

All of us who have been baptised in Christ have put on Christ... The Spirit of God has descended upon us. We find these words in chapter 3 of Paul's Letter to the Galatians. Elsewhere, addressing the Ephesians (in chapter 4 of his Letter to the Church in Ephesus) the apostle draws out some of the implications of our having been baptised in Christ. He goes on to formulate the following exhortation to the Christians there: *I urge you to live a life worthy of the calling you have received. Be completely humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another in love. Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace. There is one body and one Spirit – just as you were called to one hope when you were called – one Lord, one faith, one baptism: one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all.*

Bearing the above statements in our minds and hearts, gathered here this morning to celebrate today's feast, we are called to take to heart the words heard on the Banks of the Jordan when a voice from heaven declared: *This is my Son, the Beloved, my favour rests on Him.*

Given that we now live our lives *in Christ*, those words once spoken about Jesus, are equally applicable to us: we are God's children! For us to hear this message spoken over us: *You are my son, my daughter, my beloved child, my favour rest on you.* We should remember that in Mark's and Luke's version of the Baptism of Jesus, the voice from heaven was addressed to Christ Himself: *You are my beloved Son, my favour rests on You, in You I am well pleased.*

I wonder if any of us are as conscious as we should be of our identity as God's children and aware of our *belovedness*. To be honest, I am not at all sure we are. In a homily I preached here in the course of the past week, commenting on a text from First John, I alluded to words spoken by Pope Francis in an unprepared discourse he addressed to young people during a pastoral visit he made to Sri Lanka in January 2015. I come back to his *off the cuff* remarks this morning. In a bid to answer the questions some young people posed to him about the meaning of their lives and how they might live them fruitfully, before delivering his prepared text for their meditation, speaking spontaneously, the pope had this to say to them: *True love is both loving and letting oneself be loved.* He went on to make a point which I believe to be true for most of us, if not all of us: It is harder to let ourselves be loved than it is to love. He added: *That is why it is so hard to achieve the perfect love of God, because in love the most important thing is to allow ourselves to be loved by Him.* It is clear that Pope Francis' words there were rooted in the teaching of the one we refer to as *The Beloved Disciple*, St John, whose writings we have been invited to listen to attentively throughout the past Christmas days. The expression *the perfect love of God* which Pope Francis used is a typically Johannine phrase. But, St John is not the only one to insist upon our allowing ourselves to be loved by God. St Paul is also greatly insistent upon our allowing ourselves to be loved. Like John, whom we have heard practically every day of the Christmas season reminding us that *we are God's children*, Paul states unequivocally: we are all the children of God. Paul makes a quite enormous statement in Galatians 3 when he declares: By faith we are children of God no less than Christ is God's child. Paul is clear. We are not just step-children: we are people who have the same rights and privileges of a full son or daughter of God. To have *put on Christ* is to have been completely covered by Him; it is to be *incorporated into Christ*. To be incorporated into Christ is to be so closely associated with Christ that we experience His very own life. We are not just men and women who live *in Christ* (a phrase often used by Paul), but men and women who have been *baptised into Christ*. I read this phrase as an insistence

upon our full incorporation, an underlining of our being totally one with Christ. Stemming from that, Paul will stress elsewhere that not only are we all one in Christ, we are also all one with each other.

Just as Jesus is shown to have lived the whole of His life in perfect harmony with the Father and with the Holy Spirit, so we are called to live in perfect harmony with God and with each other. The harmony of which the apostle speaks – unity, in fact – is greatly insisted upon in the little extract from Ephesians 4 I quoted earlier. That text, as I said, draws out for us the implications of our life *in Christ* through baptism, at the heart of which is union with God and communion with each other in the Body of Christ, the Church. This is what true *Christian Unity* is all about. This is what will make the Christians one. The prayer Jesus prayed on the eve of His Passion, which is often referred to as His *High Priestly Prayer* (the text we read in John 17) makes it clear that being one with Christ makes us one with the Father and with all others who are in Christ. In that passage from John's Gospel we hear Jesus ask the Father, *that they may be one*, one in the love that He and the Father share, *that they may be one in us*. John 17 really is a marvellous declaration of Christ's love for the Father and for the Church, and, as such, it stands as a model for our prayer which should be nothing other than our declaration of love for God and our marvelling at His love for us. Both these aspects are essential to authentic Christian prayer – which will always be a dialogue. Prayer is not only our speaking to God, but our listening to Him. If in our prayer we speak to God, in a special way God speaks to us through our attentive reading to the Sacred Scriptures – or rather through our attentive *listening* to the inspired word of God – in that specific prayer form which we call *lectio divina*. We could say that the Bible is a kind of gracious *Love Letter from God* addressed to us. It is a *Love Letter* which we most stand in need of at those periods in our lives when, for whatever reason, we are (or, at least, feel we are) far apart from the Lord. Maybe what makes us feel ourselves to be at a distance from God – or God to be far removed from us – is rooted in that sense of dejection which is wont to submerge us when we become only too aware of our faults and failings, born of our struggle and difficulties to live up to and be true to our great calling in life, as it is outlined for us by Paul in his Letter to the Ephesians. There are times in all our lives when we do not quite manage to live lives a way *worthy of our calling*. This can leave us feeling at something of a low-ebb within ourselves, somewhat downcast. At such times, the Lord, who sees our need for encouragement, can and will do for us what He did for the *Disciples of Emmaus* who were making their way along life's road feeling saddened; disappointed by Jesus, within themselves and doubtless with others. We are told how the Risen Christ drew alongside them at that moment and listened to them and then *opened up for them the full message of the Scriptures*. I believe that this is what the Lord wants to do for us today. He wants to draw alongside us. He wants to listen to us. Having paid heed to our suffering and heard our questions, He then wants to speak to us. He wants us to listen to Him, as the people were bidden to do by the voice which came from heaven on Jordan's Banks. Jesus wants us to hear an echo of the Father's voice which continually spoke to Him as He journeyed through life. The invitation addressed to us today is to incline the ear of our hearts to the murmur of the Father's voice as it whispers gently into the very depths of our being. Let me just echo some of the Father's words recorded for us in Sacred Scripture, inviting you to hear them as if spoken to you personally: *My child, My beloved, You may not know me, but I know everything about you. I know when you sit down and when you rise up. I am familiar with all your ways.* (Psalm 139:1,2,3). *Even the hairs on your head have been numbered* (Matthew 10:29-31). *For you were made in my image* (cf. Genesis 1:27). *In me you live and move and have your being* (cf. Acts 17:28). *For you are my offspring* (Acts 17:28). *I knew you before you were conceived* (Jeremiah 1:4-5). *I chose you when I planned creation* (Ephesians 1:11-12). *You were not a mistake, for all your days are written in my book* (Psalm 139:15-16). *I determined the exact time of your birth and where you would live* (Acts 17:26).

You are wonderfully made (Psalm 139:14). I knit you together in your mother's womb (Psalm 139:13). And brought you forth on the day you were born (Psalm 71:6). I have been misrepresented by those who don't know me (John 8:41-44). I am not distant and angry, but am the complete expression of love (1John 4:16). And it is my desire to lavish love upon you (1 John 3:1). I offer you more than your earthly father ever could (Matthew 7:11). For I am the perfect father (Matthew 5:48). Every good gift that you receive comes from my hand (James 1: 17). For I am your provider and I meet all your needs (Matthew 6:31-33). My plan for your future has always been filled with hope (Jeremiah 29:11). Because I love you with an everlasting love (Jeremiah 31:3). My thoughts toward you are countless as the sand on the seashore (Psalm 139:17-18). And I rejoice over you with singing (Zephaniah 3:17). I will never stop doing good to you (Jeremiah 32:40). For you are my treasured possession (Exodus 19:5). I desire to establish you with all my heart and my soul (Jeremiah 32:41). And I want to show you great and marvellous things (Deuteronomy 4:29). Delight in me and I will give you the desires of your heart (Psalm 37:4). For it is I who gave you those desires (Philippians 2:13). I am able to do more for you than you could possibly imagine (Ephesians 3:20). For I am your greatest encourager (2 Thessalonians 2:16-17). I am also the Father who comforts you in all your troubles (2 Corinthians 1:3-4). When you are heart-broken, I am close to you (Psalm 34:18). As a shepherd carries a lamb, I have carried you close to my heart (Isaiah 40:11). One day I will wipe away every tear from your eyes (Revelation 21:3-4). And I will take away all the pain you have suffered on this earth (Revelation 21:3-4). I am your Father, and I love you even as I love my son, Jesus (John 17:23). For, in Jesus, my love for you is revealed. (John 17:26). He is the exact representation of my being (Hebrews 1:3). He came to demonstrate that am for you, not against you (Romans 8:31). His death was the ultimate expression of my love for you (1 John 4:10). And to tell you that I am not counting your sins (2 Corinthians 5:18-19). Jesus died so that you and I could be reconciled (2 Corinthians 5:18-19). I gave up everything I loved that I might gain your love (Romans 8:31-32). If you receive the gift of my son Jesus, you receive me (1 John 2:23). And nothing will ever separate you from my love again (Romans 8:28-39). Come home and enter into the feast (Luke 15:7). I have always been Father, and will always be Father to you (Ephesians 3:14-15). In light of all those declarations of His love for us, the Father asks each one of us this simple question: Will you be my child? (1 John 1:12-13). He follows that question up with yet another reassuring promise: I am waiting for you (Luke 15:11-32).

The *whispered declarations of love* I have just presented to you are a tapestry of Scripture verses woven together. All I have done is to have echoed inspired words from both the Old and New Testaments. The purpose of my doing so is to propose something we can find helpful when we feel down and stand in need of hope renewed. That is to open our minds and hearts to the healing touch of God's word. Sacred Scripture can bring solace to our troubled souls when we feel battered and bruised, devoid of confidence and trust. To listen to declarations of God's love for us through Sacred Scripture can be especially consoling when we are led to traverse dark passages in our lives. And, who isn't? The Bible's life-affirming, restructuring words can correct and help redress all the negative things we can hear said by others and/or all the self-destructive things we may be listening to within ourselves when our temptation is to allow *our inner darkness to speak to us*. When the going is tough and it seems as if the Lord is at a distance from us, or again, when we have messed up ourselves and strayed far away from God... whatever the need may be for us to re-connect with our Heavenly Father, it is good to us to turn to the inspired words of Scripture for solace and comfort, encouragement and strength. When discordant voices arise within us, we should try to hear the silence in the midst of all the din, at the heart of which the Father's voice speaks to us. The Father says to you and to me this morning: *My beloved*. On this Feast of the Baptism of the Lord let us strive to allow ourselves to *be loved*.

Today I find myself recalling words I heard in a homily some forty years ago for this feast. I think of lines preached by Dom Paul Grammont in which he quoted the beautiful Introit heard at the Midnight Eucharist of Christmas: *Dominus dixit ad me, filius meus es tu, ego hodie genui te... The Lord said to me, you are my son, this day have I begotten you.* He paraphrased those words as saying this: *Me, You, today Us... Now and Forever.* I invite you to join me in reiterating in the silence of your hearts those words. Let us dare to make them our response to the Father's *declarations of love* we have listened to this morning. Let us repeat them in our hearts: *Me, You, today Us... Now and Forever.*

Amen!