

BAPTISM OF JESUS HOMILY ESSENDON 2021
WHAT DOES BAPTISM MEAN FOR YOU AND ME?

Mk 2.1-12 Is 42.1-7 AA 10.34-38

The beginning of 2021 has been a sobering time, with masks back on indoors and coronavirus still lurking in the background, with ongoing vigilance and precautions taken. It's a bit like atomic radiation, in that just because you can't see it, doesn't mean it is not there!

We've seen unbelievable scenes in the USA, with the outrageous and unlawful violent invasion of the US Congress, incited by a megalomaniacal poor loser, spouting lies, hatred and conspiracy theories, with no substance at all, with encouragement from extreme social media sources. And yet, a significant number of so-called Christians seem to pretend he has God's approval, portraying him as so-called *'pro-life'*! The often incoherent pronouncements made would suggest that there is no connection here between anything to do with religion of any sort or Christian values, and it's a frightening thing that so many people think this is leadership, let alone have anything to do with faith.

That being said, today we celebrate a perhaps paradoxical feast, with Jesus being baptized in the Jordan river by John the Baptist, whose baptism is described unashamedly by Mark as for the forgiveness of sins, whereas we believe Jesus to have been sinless. Matthew and Luke tone this down, stressing John the Baptist's humility and acknowledgement of Jesus as the one who takes away sin, even though all 4 Gospels describe the incident in their own way. Perhaps this occasion can be interpreted as identifying Jesus as the Word of God, born among us and fully sharing our humanity, showing us the way, beginning with John's baptism, which prefigures the Christian practice of initiation from the earliest days of the Church in action.

Baptism is the initiation rite of for most Christian churches, although the age and stage where it is celebrated varies, depending on historical tradition and practice. Infant baptism is our practice and goes back to the time when families would join the Christian community and parents naturally wished their children to share their faith and commitment to following the way of Jesus. Vatican II re-emphasized the primary responsibility of all the baptized to share in the priesthood of the faithful, encouraging more active involvement of laity as the People of God, and not just passive observers, subservient to priests and bishops. Active participation in pastoral ministry and service was to be encouraged and implemented, far beyond the unfortunate now obsolete *'pray, pay and obey'* mantra. And isn't that what we see today in our faith communities? Thank God for that!

It is not just a passing ritual or social occasion, and excuse for having a party, but a serious commitment on the part of all concerned, to reflect Christian faith in word and action, thereby setting a positive example to those being baptized, as all present are meant to renew the promises made for them at baptism to reject sin and evil and profess their faith, so it's a call to an active role of support and engagement.

Interestingly, Bishop Geoff Robinson, who died recently, spoke of the most important day of his life as the day of his Baptism (not that he could remember it!), not his ordination as a priest or a bishop. He was a bishop who spoke his mind, and was a pastor of action and man of faith with vision.

It's a very good thing to highlight role models of Christian faith and life. This past week has seen sad farewells to two of our long-term faithful parishioners, Ronnie Devlin and Bev Scott, both of whom reflected in action just what being a faithful Christian means. Since I arrived here as parish priest over 3 years ago now, they were not so involved, due to age and illness, but I consulted my predecessor and good friend, Bill Attard, and he gave me some very helpful and insightful background, about the sort of faithful parishioners they had been.

Of Ronnie, he says: *"Oh she was a wonder. Seamus was always pulling her leg and she just bounced along laughing. Very hospitable and always supportive. A most likeable woman. Ronny... absorbed it all with a smile. Daily Eucharist was central to their faith, (but it didn't stop there!) which always translated into action."*

As for Bev, he told me: *"Bev for example was a gracious woman, with a gift for prayer, liturgy, education, social justice... Bev enjoyed the Melbourne Cup, supported Catholic Education, and was totally Vatican II in her theology. She was a member of our Liturgy Team (e.g. she composed the prayers of the faithful for years,*

*and was a major contributor to our Reconciliation Rites and creative Holy Weeks). She was part of the refugee group, supported us with the 90th anniversary celebrations, Pastoral Care and Adult Ed Teams, and when we were trying to get GodStart off the ground for young mothers, etc. She wasn't afraid to give informed thoughtful feed-back... She was compassionate and her sense of fun was disarming. I am certainly not alone in saying she was **inspirational** and I am certain... others would have drawn strength from her attentive thoughtfulness also."* What more could she have done?

I was alerted further to Bev's outreach and diverse talents, when a chap phoned, asking if he could attend her funeral Mass. When I asked his connection, he said she had taught him at St Mary's West Melbourne (I think in the 1980's), and that he and a few of his mates from that time, wanted to come and pay tribute, which they did. What does that say of her as a person and as a teacher? It speaks for itself!

And back to some practical advice from Bill too: *"It seems churches are a source of infection the State governments are going to police."* It's a wise warning that we have to continue to be vigilant and observe the necessary protocols of registering and sanitizing for some time yet.

Back to the Baptism of Jesus, it clearly establishes Jesus as the one sent by God to proclaim Good News and fulfil his public mission of service to God's people from this point on in his adult life. Prior to this event, we know very little, but can presume that Jesus prepared himself with time out in the desert, maybe with John the Baptist, in prayer and reflection. The dove of peace descending, and the affirmation of Jesus by God as his Son sets the tone for his coming ministry. As Brendan Byrne SJ concludes on a theological note: ***"Today's feast is about our baptism as well. That sacrament brings human beings into the divine love that is the Trinity. It empowers us, as it empowered Jesus, to reflect that love to the world."***

john hannon

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