



Christian Education

A series of Sermons and Occasional Papers
From the clergy and members
of Holy Trinity Church
Forbes Park, Makati

Date: 08 January 2006
Title: Baptism
Comment: Insert Comment here
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Readings for this Sunday:

Old Testament Isaiah 42:1-9
Epistle Acts 10:34-38
Gospel Mark 1:7-11

When our Lord Jesus Christ was baptized in the River Jordan by John the Baptist, it began his public ministry in the world. From the banks of that river, Jesus went I into the wilderness to test himself, and soon after chose his first disciples and began to proclaim that the Kingdom God was at hand.

Today also begins John Mertyn's public ministry: his witness to what God in Jesus Christ is doing in his life and why it was a good thing. It is the confirmation of something that his friends and family realize has been happening for some time, and which John himself has come to appreciate in the context of this parish family.

The celebration of baptism, especially of someone old enough to know and participate in what is going on, is a deeply important experience for a church. We don't see it much, and so our frame of reference in baptism is most often tiny babies being carried against their will to the marble basin over there, soon thereafter to be surrounded by family and friends and ninongs and ninangs and camera flashes. That is not what is happening here. This is more of an ordination- the ordination to a life of service and witness as part of the Church of Jesus Christ.

My own thoughts and feelings have changed about this rite of baptism over the years. I have seen many, many families and sponsors come unprepared to the celebration of a sacrament that makes frequent reference to adult commitment to faith and the frankly terrifying experience of death and resurrection in Christ. It makes the clergy exasperated, angry, resigned. It can also make them determined that when at last the chance comes to baptize an adult, well then by God he's going to be so well prepared, so ready for the big step, so fully educated in the Christian Faith that all of those careless baptisms will be redeemed. That poor guy will have to study his bible, his church history, his church politics and the long list of words that only Episcopalians seem to use, like "genuflect" and "Shrove Tuesday." Months, if not years of preparation will ensue until at last, the candidate for baptism passes all his tests with flying colors and at last proves himself worthy of Christian Baptism. And that is where that who, noble enterprise falls apart.

You see, baptism isn't a reward. It's not graduation from a course of study. It's not a seal of approval given for good behavior. It's none of that. It is what God is doing in the life of the person being baptised, and the Church- his Christian family and friends- celebrating a new beginning in his life. How can you reward something that is brand new? How can you celebrate an arrival if the journey has just started? No, this isn't an occasion of John Mertyn completion as a fully-formed, spiritual superman. It is the beginning of an official relationship- the first steps of a publicly recognized friendship between God and John. It's almost that simple.

I say, almost. In fact, it is rather dramatic. It involves solemn promises about the intention to be faithful to this relationship, and the prayers and best wishes of the congregation to that effect. It involves the rite of washing in water- a sign of putting off the old life, but also of death and rebirth (especially when it involves immersion like it used to do). Then the anointing with holy oil by the bishop as the sign and the vehicle of God's Holy Spirit to further strengthen the resolve of the new Christian along the way. Finally, the whole congregation joins as the newly baptized first receives the sacrament of Holy Communion: the final act that culminates this "birthday", this inauguration. It is a solemn thing, and we are all honored to play our respective parts in it, but it's not us that make it happen: it is God. God has chosen you, John, and he's holding his hand out to you to begin a very peculiar, very

wonderful adventure. Please don't blow it. And please don't take it for granted. But also know that along this journey you will never be alone. We'll be here with you: your Christian brothers and sisters, sharing the sorrows, sharing the joys, sharing the relationship.

More than a thousand years ago, Leo the Great, pope and bishop of Rome wrote a rather wonderful Christmas sermon. I would like to quote just a bit of it for this occasion, especially for you, John. Imagine that it is the whole, great witness of the Christian Faith throughout its history speaking to you as a soon-to-be new Christian:

"Beloved, let us give thanks to God the Father, through his Son, in the Holy Spirit, because in his great love for us he took pity on us, and when we were dead in our sins he brought us to life with Christ, so that in him we might be a new creation. Let us throw off our old nature and all its ways and, as we have come to birth in Christ, let us renounce the works of the flesh.

Christian, remember your dignity, and now that you share in God's own nature, do not return by sin to your former base condition. Bear in mind who is your head and of whose body you are a member. Do not forget that you have been rescued from the power of darkness and brought into the light of God's kingdom.

Through the sacrament of baptism you have become a temple of the Holy Spirit. Do not drive away so great a guest by evil conduct and become again a slave to the devil, for your liberty was bought by the blood of Christ."

John, welcome to the family. And welcome to the great adventure of Life in Christ!