

Reflection for Sunday, January 10, 2021

The Baptism of the Lord

We are at the start - the initiation - of many new things right now - the start of a new church year, the start of a new calendar year, the start of the roll-out of covid-19 vaccinations across Canada.

So, it's fitting that the first Sunday of Ordinary Time starts with a baptism - what we now refer to as one of the sacraments of initiation. But it's not just any baptism; it is Jesus being immersed in the river Jordan by John the Baptist. Despite John's protests, Jesus insisted that he be treated exactly like the others there that day.

At Christmas, we celebrated Jesus' birth but it is really about so much more than his birth. Jesus being born of Mary in the manger is a concrete manifestation of God joining the creatures he created in our human journey. God incarnate; **the** incarnation. God sending his Son to share in the human experience. How amazing is that.

When that happened, Jesus didn't arrive to just try out being human. He didn't just dip his toe in the human experience; he fully immersed himself, quite literally, as we see in today's Gospel.

He lived a fully human life; had a childhood with his parents although we are told very little about that time. I wonder if he realized when he was a child that he was different; if he knew who he was. Or did he, like we do, gradually come to awareness about what life is about and what our role might be in it.

I don't know about you but growing up, if I thought about it at all, I just assumed that my family and household was pretty much the same as everyone else's. Sure, I knew that my best friend had a bit more spending money than I did, but it was only as I got a bit older and shared in my friends' lives that I started to see more differences and realize that each person's reality was unique and sometimes very different from mine.

For instance, my dad was quite a stickler about certain things. On Christmas morning, when we were children, my brother and I weren't allowed to open presents or even our stockings until we had gone to church, had breakfast, and washed, dried and put away all the dishes. Then and only then were presents opened. We accepted this although you can imagine the pent-up anticipation. It was quite a shock to me when I learned that some of my friends just tore down the stairs on Christmas morning as soon as they woke up and dove right in, while their parents were still in bed.

At Christmas, the focus was on the baby Jesus but, unlike the usual practice in today's church, Jesus' baptism was not when he was a baby. He was presented in the temple as an infant at the prescribed time of course by Mary and Joseph according to Jewish laws and traditions. But Jesus' baptism was when he was 30 years old, when he was old enough to understand its meaning and, by insisting that John baptize him, when it was a conscious, mature decision. In that sense, Jesus' baptism was a true rite of initiation – a turning point from what was before to something else after.

Many cultures have rites of initiation, often marking the passage from childhood to adulthood. Some indigenous peoples send their young men off on vision quests.

In South America, la Quinceañera is a big celebration of a girl's transition to womanhood at age 15. When I was in Ecuador, my Development and Peace group thought we were attending a public mass at a local church but it turned out that it was the mass in celebration of a young girl's Quinceañera. It almost seemed like a wedding in terms of its grandeur, the number of attendees and the fancy clothing. Families must save their whole lives for this event. And while it seemed that the externalities were very important, I am sure that this young girl was well aware that this was a turning point in her life and that she was no longer a child.

In our western culture, we have lost most of our rites of initiation and unfortunately many of those that have remained have often turned into episodes of hazing and humiliation rather than opportunities for personal growth.

If Jesus had an inkling before that day that his life was about to change, surely when the heavens opened up and God said, “You are my beloved Son; with you I am well pleased”, there could be no doubt - that was the moment that Jesus’ public life started. His Baptism was his initiation into his new life, his true life that we read about in the Gospels - totally divine and yet also totally human.

Thinking of our current practice of Baptism, we also know that it is very much a family occasion. Often, family members are chosen as godparents. Certainly, family is present and involved. So too at Jesus’ baptism. It was his divine family – his father and the Holy Spirit - that affirmed his initiation. The Father was present via his voice from the heavens, the Holy Spirit in the form of a dove and Jesus embodied. The Holy Trinity fully present and publicly witnessing this pivotal moment. Their presence, each in a different form, was required by the situation and seems to have been a new way of their being together in the world. It sort of reminded me of the new ways we are having to find to be together with our families during this pandemic.

Thinking about Jesus’ baptism and his initiation into his new life made me think that in addition to our own Baptism, we are also given opportunities for mini baptisms or re-initiations. When we, as a parish community, welcome a new member, whether a baby, a child or an adult, we have an opportunity to renew our own Baptismal vows, to do a re-start. Doing so with intention may help make us more attuned to God’s voice, so we can hear if he is calling us to a change in our life’s path. I know that the next time we meet for such an event, in addition to just being overjoyed at being together again in community, I won’t just go through the motions like I know I did before but rather reflect on my own Baptism and what my re-Baptism means for my life now.

Joan O’Connell

St. Joseph’s Parish, Ottawa