

BAPTISM OF THE LORD YEAR A 2011 HOMILY

(Isaiah 42: 1-4, 6-7; Act 10: 34-38; Matthew 3: 13-17)

BAPTISM MAKES YOU WANT TO SCREAM

I was baptized at age ten days. In those times, that was actually not so quick. A lot of babies were baptized after just a few days because of the fear that they might die before receiving this sacrament. This meant, in effect, that mothers did not usually see their kids baptized because it was also the practice then of keeping Moms in bed for several weeks after giving birth. My mother never saw any of her four children baptized. As was typical, my Dad and the godparents went to church and the priest baptized my sibling along with all the other kids who showed up that Sunday. Since many families were larger in those days, my father reported that the priest would say to the men: "see you next year!"

My Mom (as well as my Dad) and all our family were able to witness the Baptism of my three nephews because customs had changed by then. And I had the joy of giving the boys this sacrament. I remember that they all screamed a bit during the ceremony. This happens sometimes, of course, despite the invention over the last few decades of pacifiers and other devices to placate the babies. As a priest, I have always enjoyed doing baptisms even if the little ones yell their heads off.

This week at my small church community meeting, our reflection booklet mentioned how babies will sometimes get fussy and even downright loud during the service and the author of the passage in the booklet made the point that this was somehow appropriate. If we really understand what we are getting into with our Baptism, screaming is probably a very sensible response. After all, Baptism makes us one with our brother Jesus Christ and obliges us to follow in his footsteps by living as he did. When we recall all that Jesus suffered for us in his passion and death, suffering that made him literally scream in pain, does this not make us apprehensive that our baptismal vocation is to follow his example? Jesus tells John the Baptist in today's gospel from Matthew that it is to fulfill righteousness that Jesus wants this Baptism. Righteousness is essentially doing the right thing or doing what is just. So Jesus is baptized because he is the embodiment of justice and living this out, as we know, caused him terrible grief and pain. And, again, we are called to follow his example and be models of justice.

So I began to think about some times when I wanted to scream because something was terribly wrong or unjust. One big memory was from the time I visited Honduras over twenty years ago. I spent several weeks then visiting a friend of mine who was a missionary priest in that very poor country. I had many unbelievable experiences there, but none probably sadder than the day my friend, Fr. Tom, and I happened upon a man lying in the street half dead from a terrible infection. What made me want to yell was that people were just passing him by and ignoring him. It was, of course, warm weather and there were clusters of folks nearby who paid no attention at all to this poor fellow. Tom and I took him to a clinic in the town where he eventually died. We came upon him too late to save him.

I later had the chance to express my dismay to Tom that people would let the man die. He explained that in that part of the world, it is not uncommon for this phenomenon to occur. There are so many people in poor countries like Honduras who are dying or seriously ill that it is hard to look after anyone

but your own family – if even that is possible. In addition, Tom said, Hondurans are notorious for not paying attention to details, partly because (again) a lot of folks have to be concerned about bigger challenges like where their family's next meal will come from! One woman at the site where we found the dying man told us she had seen him some hours earlier but had "forgot" he was there! Of course, Central America is not unique in the occurrence of incidents which show people don't care. We have all heard of people in our own country who have suffered and even died because no one would take the time or the risk to intervene to help. Perhaps we have all even been guilty to some degree of not caring enough. At the same time, we have plenty of examples of those who take their baptism or just their basic humanity seriously by going out of their way to help someone. In any case, I probably had no right as a privileged North American to be so self righteous about the lack of concern that Hondurans showed that day. But I think screaming is still the right response to that situation.

On this day when the church invites us to renew our baptismal commitment and reminds us as the holy water hits our faces – take our Christian vocation more seriously, we are asked to embody a passion for justice as Jesus did. In the tradition of the prophets, he cried out when the poor and the sick and the oppressed and even the sinner were ignored or harmed. We too might want to scream about young men and women killed and maimed in unnecessary wars, about Haitians dying of cholera, about folks homeless in Columbus, about our neighbors who are losing their jobs and even their homes, and about those who do not have health care which the church proclaims in the name of Jesus to be a basic human right and, indeed, to be a "Life" issue.

I still today want to scream about what I saw in Honduras where good people let a man die in the streets. We all know that we cannot snap our fingers and make everything right in the world. But we can all do something – no matter how small or seemingly insignificant. I recall Blessed Mother Theresa's ministry of picking the dying up from the gutters in Calcutta, India, and simply taking them to a warm and hospitable place where they could at least die in dignity. This is basically what Fr. Tom and I did for that man in Honduras. I recall seeing a photograph taken by a reporter inside one of Mother Theresa's houses for the dying. The photographer was shocked that the picture turned out because it was close to pitch dark in the room as the sun had gone down. Yet the photo was perfect and filled with light. He remarked that this was the light not from the sun or electric lamps but the light that comes from mercy and compassion.

Hopefully we baptized people will want to scream at what's wrong and unjust. But more importantly, our desire to be like Christ into whom we are baptized will move us to care in all the little everyday opportunities that come our way. By living the grace of our Baptism, we will become more and more like Jesus and he who is the light of the world will shine through us and make bright the lives of everyone around us. The daily snapshot of our goodness will then dispel the darkness of evil and illuminate the face of Christ whose image is stamped on us through Baptism.