

Year A

Matthew 3:13-17

I read the following on an internet blog recently. It's quite long but I'm pleading your patience as I read it because there's much here that is important and relevant for today as we celebrate the Feast of the Baptism of the Lord. The context is Roman Catholic but the main point is universal across the Christian Church.

"It's a new year, and that means a new MASTER CALENDAR in the kitchen—a

familiar sight in most homes with children. There's always plenty of room for reminders and appointments, and it's the authoritative source for birthdays, anniversaries (especially ours—mustn't forget!), and baptismal days.

Do you mark baptismal days in your family? We've been doing it from the beginning of our marriage—it just makes sense. If birthdays are how we annually celebrate the life of those we love, then baptismal days are opportunities to celebrate the beginning of their eternal life—that spiritual rebirth into

the family of God that Christ won for us through the cross.

My own baptismal day is highlighted in red like everyone else's, but I also get to spotlight my confirmation—and not just because I'm in charge of preparing the calendar. I was raised Presbyterian and baptized accordingly, but my spiritual rebirth wasn't fully accomplished until I made a profession of faith and was confirmed as a Catholic a quarter century later.

And what a monumental occasion that was—truly a moment of conversion, including a new Church, a new way of life, even a new

name! While it was also the occasion of my first Holy Communion, I especially associate my conversion with confirmation because it constituted a permanent change of character and a once-in-a-lifetime event—just like my Protestant infant baptism.

And there's an additional connection between these two sacraments because confirmation is fundamentally a “strengthening” (con-firmare) for the baptized who are henceforth commissioned to live out their baptism with gusto. The Catechism puts it thus:

Confirmation ... gives us a special strength of the Holy Spirit to spread and defend the faith by word and action as true witnesses of Christ, to confess the name of Christ boldly, and never to be ashamed of the Cross.

I might've been in a suit and tie at that Easter Vigil so long ago, but I remember well picturing myself on my knees before my liege lord, imploring him to send me on a quest or into battle. In short, my confirmation was a launch—the beginning of an adventure!

Is that how you remember your confirmation? Unless you're an adult convert, probably not.

For so many cradle Catholics, confirmation is merely a bump-in-the-road on the way to adult independence—a teenage rite of passage more than anything else, and, for those not enrolled in Catholic schools, the end of any kind of structured religious formation. Instead of commencing an adventure, confirmation is too often experienced as a graduation commencement—a capstone and a conclusion, and the last time the recipients will be compelled to do anything overtly “religious” outside of showing up for Mass ... maybe.”¹

¹ <http://www.crisismagazine.com/2015/rethinking-confirmation-age>

I have been so often aware of meeting a keen baptismal candidate, or a parent that is keen that a beloved child is presented for baptism as soon as possible, or an individual that wants to undertake communion classes or confirmation classes, whatever they may be called. Then after many weeks, getting to know these people, the day of the special event arrives, there is a special sense of God's Spirit and blessings and then..... that's it. We grow apart and after a while all is forgotten. I'm not seeking to blame individuals for that today. If there's a problem it lies with the church, not with

individuals in the main. But my intention today is not to lay blame; it is to make sense of the problem and to try to offer a solution; a way forward that would encourage better practice.

This is the day when the church around the world is encouraged to reflect on the baptism of Jesus Christ, that unusual, in fact, absolutely unique event that refuses to allow attention to remain on itself but keeps asking awkward questions of ourselves! - annoying that, isn't it? You see, the baptism of Jesus Christ was a beginning and not an

end. The writer of the blog expressed his puzzlement that so many view baptism or confirmation as the culmination of Christian commitment: that's it, once it has been followed through then one can move on and leave the Christian faith as a background influence at most. The church has failed to teach the true nature of baptism and therefore has failed to encourage believers to properly embark upon their Christian lives and commitment. I love the story of St. Patrick and King Aengus. I've told you this before but it's worth telling again.

The story is told about the baptism of King Aengus by St. Patrick in the middle of the fifth century. Sometime during the rite, St. Patrick leaned on his sharp-pointed staff and inadvertently stabbed the king's foot. After the baptism was over, St. Patrick looked down at all the blood, realized what he had done, and begged the king's forgiveness. Why did you suffer this pain in silence, the Saint wanted to know. The king replied, "I thought it was part of the ritual."

In a sense King Aengus was absolutely right. Baptism is the beginning of a new life in a new identity which will always lead to self-

sacrifice. As Jesus at his baptism set aside his will in order to receive the blessing of his Father and to live for his Father's will, so we following Jesus are called to do likewise. If we receive baptism and then walk away from the church then we are in no position to follow.

It is important to pick up in Matthew's recording of the baptism of Jesus the parallels between the new creation of Jesus' ministry and the original creation of the world. In the beginning the Spirit hovered over the waters and the word of God brought the created order into being. Here the Spirit

of God descended on Jesus as he rose from the water and the word of God pronounced that this was his Son with whom he was well pleased. Baptism is every bit as much a new creation as was God's original creation of the world. A beginning which moves forward to a life of service and devotion. In that we all hope to become more fully and completely human.

A 150 pound man is made up of:

92.4 lbs. oxygen

31.5 lbs. carbon

14.6 lbs. hydrogen

4.6 lbs. nitrogen

2.8 lbs. phosphorous

1.12 lbs. chlorine

1.02 lbs. iron

0.34 lbs potassium

0.24 lbs. sulphur

0.12 lbs sodium

0.04 lbs magnesium

0.02 lbs. flourine

But a human being is so much more than that! We can only understand baptism properly in the light of the incarnation. It is God made flesh in Jesus that brings a focussed purpose to the rite of baptism. Baptism is a confirmation that an individual

is set apart to follow in the way of Jesus Christ. He has been there before us. He has done this before us and so we are invited to walk his way. Our baptism then moves from confirmation to commissioning; blessing for service as a disciple of Jesus Christ.

One day a young woman was walking home from work when she saw a sight a little girl standing on the street corner, begging. The little girl's clothes were paper thin and dirty, her hair matted and unclean, and her cheeks red from the cold.

The young woman dropped a few coins in the begging bowl, gave the girl a smile and

walked on. As she walked she started to feel guilty. How could she go home to her warm house with its full pantry and well supplied wardrobe while this little girl shivered on the street.

The young woman also began to feel angry, angry with God. She let her feeling be known in a prayer of protest. “God, how can you let these sort of things happen? Why don’t you do something to help this girl?”

And then, to her surprise God answered. He said, “I did do something. I created you.”

We all receive that challenge today as we remember the fact of our baptism, or maybe

even as we consider baptism. May God
guide and bless us.