

Homily for January 9, 2022.



On this last day of the Christmas Season two questions concerning Jesus' baptism arise in me: 1) What is Jesus, the sinless one, doing in the waters reserved for sinners? And 2) Why is this story proclaimed in the Christmas Season, given the fact that Jesus is about 30 years old? Beyond satisfying our curiosity around those questions, we should always ask—with every gospel story--what is this gospel story inviting us to, here and now? I think those first two questions concerning Jesus and the third one concerning us, all have to do with solidarity.

Jesus is being baptized not because he needs his sins forgiven but because baptism puts him in solidarity with those who do. In a sense, we've answered the question of why this is a Christmas story. Christmas stories are about incarnation, of spirit entering into matter, of God entering into the human story, of heaven uniting with earth. By entering into the waters of the Jordan, Jesus is taking incarnation seriously. God has never been satisfied with just tinkering with us from the comfort of some celestial throne, never really getting involve in our lives. The truth is God has always desired a mutual love affair with us. The baptism that Jesus undergoes is God's way of saying, "I want to get close to you; it's the only thing I have ever desired. I can only fully love you by becoming you, and loving you from the bottom up."

I am no theologian, but I have no problem believing Jesus is fully divine. To be fully divine means you're in solidarity with God; you share in God's life. As good as that was, it wasn't good enough for Jesus. He also wanted to share fully in our lives, our human, messy, sometimes disappointing lives. He wanted to be in solidarity not only with God but also with every human being in this world. We hear about God's solidarity with us every Palm Sunday when we hear St. Paul's words: **"Christ Jesus, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be grasped, but emptied himself taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death—even death on a cross"** (Phil. 2:6-8).

That is beyond compassion; that is what we call solidarity. Each of us is challenge to grow our compassion into solidarity. Compassion is a movement of the heart to respond to someone who is suffering. Compassion means to "feel with" or to "suffer with" another. It's the spontaneous desire to let the one suffering know he/she is not alone. We have lots of examples of compassion here in our parish, because we have lots of compassionate people.

Solidarity is a little different. Solidarity is not only a movement of the heart toward someone in need, it's also a decision to join with, to form community with those who are suffering. Compassion may be one-way, but solidarity is a relationship where both sides give and receive. Maybe you give once a year to Harvest House's Thanksgiving or Christmas Campaign. That's wonderful, if you do. That's an example of compassion. However, if you volunteered there once a week, year-round, that would be compassion growing into solidarity. With each week, you enter more and more into the lives of the clients of Harvest House and you realize they are giving you as much as you are giving them. I certainly know that to be

true, the more I volunteer at the Dorchester prison. Compassion, as a starting point, says, “I’m going to do this for you, because you are in need, and I have the ability to satisfy your need.” Compassion that grows into solidarity says, “What is it you need most? Educate me about what life looks like from your angle. What would be most helpful in your life right now?” Ultimately, solidarity is about mutual respect.

I cannot help but think about how much further international aid would go if we first entered into solidarity with poorer countries and first asked, “What do you need most at this point?” It’s a question that respects people autonomy rather than imposing solutions from above, as well intentioned as they may be. I’m just starting to understand why Jesus moves from the top of heaven to the bottom of the Jordan River. He’s being driven by a love and a solidarity that pushes him toward every bottom dweller, every forgotten, lonely, outsider that has ever existed.

Whenever Jesus expressed solidarity with us, there was always resistance. John the Baptist himself resisted baptizing Jesus when he said, ***“It is you who should be baptizing me. I’m not worthy to untie the straps of your sandals.”*** Jesus heard those words of John the Baptist as a reason to excuse himself from entering into the human condition, and he resisted them. He told John, “Baptize me, and some day, you’ll understand why.” Every time Jesus mentioned going to Jerusalem and entering into his suffering—something we all endure—the disciples tried to stop him. Jesus resisted that temptation and went anyways. The night before Jesus’ crucifixion, we have another resistance to solidarity. Jesus goes down to wash Peter’s feet and Peter resists him with, ***“You will never wash my feet.”*** Peter wanted a heady relationship with Jesus, at best, not a relationship where the divine would love right down to his dusty, calloused feet. Peter wanted a monarch to reign from a heavenly throne, but what he got was the incarnation—Jesus acting as a servant to all. So, Jesus washed his feet, because the drive toward solidarity was stronger than the resistance. Right to the very end, there is resistance. Moments away from death, there was a last temptation for Jesus to break the solidarity with God and human beings. One of the thieves, crucified next to Jesus, told Jesus to “save himself.” In other words, “Break it with the world of suffering and save yourself, if you are God’s Son.” He was God’s Son but he had no intention of breaking his solidarity with all the suffering people of the world. The love for humanity was stronger than the temptation to take privilege for himself as Son of God. And just in case we missed the point, the Risen Lord appears to his apostle still bearing the wound in his hands, feet and side. Even in his resurrected state, Jesus will not break the solidarity of the suffering people of this world.

So now I’m starting to understand why Jesus is in these baptismal waters. It has nothing to do with washing away his sins. It has everything to do with emptying himself of every privilege associated with being the Son of God. He needed a sign for himself and for us that the emptying was complete.

John the Baptist said Jesus will baptize with the Holy Spirit and fire. Much like the fire Moses encountered in the burning bush, the fire that burns without ever burning out, that’s the fire of God’s love for us. Christmas tells us of the fire that burns; the rest of Jesus’s life tells us of the fire that burns without ever burning out.

Fr. Phil