

Homily for Sunday, January 12, 2025 (Baptism of the Lord)

The gospel we just heard begs the questions: “Who is this Jesus being baptized?” And if he is the sinless one, then why is he undergoing a baptism that we



traditionally believe was for the forgiveness of sins?” I think if we can answer the first question—who this Jesus is—we’ll also have the answer as to why he’s in these baptismal waters at all. Who Jesus is and why he’s being baptized have

implications for our lives, otherwise, it’s just a piece of someone else’s history.

To go forward, let’s start by going back. The coming of the Messiah, as we heard from all those Advent and Christmas stories, was on the minds of our Jewish ancestors for hundreds of years before the birth of Jesus. Our history is a Judeo-Christian history, and we should always see ourselves as Jewish-Christians.

The prophets, like Isaiah in that first reading, longed for a Messiah who would be unlike any ruler the world had ever known. On Christmas Eve we got a glimpse into Isaiah’s ideal ruler when he spoke about a Wonderful Counselor, a Mighty God, an Everlasting Father, a Prince of Peace. He goes on to say that this Messiah, whenever he comes, will bring endless peace and uphold justice and righteousness. These are pretty good things to long for.

Then tragedy struck—life happened. The Jewish people’s dreams were crushed. The 12 tribes of Israel were first defeated by the Assyrians and then the Babylonians and the people were deported, scattered and taken prisoner. So much for a kingdom that would be built on justice and on a peace that would never end.

Here’s where we pick up the story in today’s first reading. In the midst of such a tragedy, God places an image of the Messiah in Isaiah’s mind. God says to Isaiah, “Here’s my servant, whom I delight in. I put my spirit in him, and he will bring forth justice for the nations. He won’t cry or lift his voice or make it heard in the street.” (ie. He won’t draw attention to himself with loud speeches and gaudy parades in his honour). And here’s the description of this Messiah I like best: “A bruised reed he will not break, and a dimly burning wick he will not quench.” In other words, this Messiah will never disregard the small, insignificant, and weak of the world.

That prediction, that prophecy, was made 700 years before the birth of Jesus. It’s exactly what we got in Jesus when he did come. A bruised reed would be so easy to break, and a dimly burning wick would be so easy to snuff out. Yet, Jesus, the true Messiah, will do neither. The bruised reed and dimly burning wick can represent so many people who are struggling physically, spiritually, or morally. Our little efforts in life really do matter to God and are supported by God at every moment. God isn’t into results, but God is very much into supporting even the smallest of our efforts. The smallest act of kindness is caught up in the everlasting memory of God and forges the world ahead. Can you believe it? That’s what

prompted Jesus to say, “Whoever gives a cup of water to one who is thirsty will not lose their reward” (Mk. 9:41).

When the Pharisees were plotting Jesus’ death, Jesus wasn’t secretly plotting a counter attack to show them who was boss. Instead, the Gospel writer Matthew reminded us of God’s words to Isaiah 700 years prior, “Look to this one, my handpicked servant. I take delight in him, and my spirit is upon him. He’ll bring justice and peace to the nations. He won’t yell, won’t raise his voice, won’t make a commotion in the streets. He won’t walk over anyone’s feeling or lord it over the weak and vulnerable. He won’t break the bruised reed or snuff out the smoldering wick. Instead, he’ll suffer people’s foolishness and sins until his justice and peace triumph” (Mt. 12:20).

Now we are getting close to understanding why Jesus is in the waters of baptism. These waters are not waters to wash away his sins, for he has no sin. He’s in the Jordan River being baptized as a sign of his solidarity, his oneness, his tightness with every human being—with every bruised reed and every smoldering wick. Jesus will not wipe out our sins through an exercise of power and might. Instead, he’ll join us in our human condition, our weakness, our vulnerability—and never leave us—until our transformation is complete.

A bruised reed and a dimly burning wick are worthless in the eyes of the world. They have no power, no stability, no purpose. A bruised reed is good for nothing but to be cut down and discarded. Likewise, in the world there are many people bruised and wounded emotionally, spiritually, and physically. They are feeble, and

to most of the world, they are dispensable. But not to God. The prophecy that Jesus fulfilled is that the bruised reed he would not break. It's the prophecy that speaks of Christ's tender, compassionate care for the weak and neglected of society.

The man with the withered hand was a bruised reed. Jesus enters the baptismal waters to be with this man. He restores the man's strength.

The woman who committed adultery was a bruised reed. Jesus enters the baptismal waters to be with her. He forgives her and sets her free.

Jairus, the synagogue leader whose daughter died, was a bruised reed. Jesus enters into the baptismal waters to be with Jairus in his grief. He raises the girl from the dead.

The Apostle Peter, who suffers shame because he denies knowing Jesus, is a bruised reed. Jesus enters the baptismal waters to be with him. He offers Peter renewed friendship and fellowship after the resurrection.

Over and over again in the gospels, we see Jesus caring for the "bruised reeds" of the world. If he did it for them, he'll do it for us. You may be like a bruised reed or a candle barely burning. You may be pressed down with the troubles of this world, you may be struggling with fear or doubts, you may be feeble and discouraged to the point of breaking. But know this: Jesus cares. He comes from God who

delights in strengthening what is bruised and of breathing on the tiniest of flames in order to turn it into a wildfire.

When Jesus was baptized and praying, we are told that the heaven was open. When heaven opens, it symbolized divine will—this is what God wants. It's God's will to be close to you in your struggles. When the heaven opened for Jesus, it never closed. You are permanently in communion with God.

A bruised reed he will not break. A smoldering wick he will not snuff out. That's who Jesus is. That's why he's in the waters.

~Fr. Phil