

## Homily: Baptism of the Lord 2022 (Year C)

Exactly five years ago today I moved to St Clare's. Hard to believe! I remember waking up that morning at around 4am, unable to get a full night's sleep because of the uncertainty ahead. I knew that by the end of the day, I would have moved house, I would have a new routine and new responsibilities, and I would be amongst a new community, hardly any of whom I had already met. Although I had been a priest for more than a decade and had plenty of experience in different parishes, this was the first time I had been asked to lead a parish community. I knew it was a very good and very active parish, and wondered how I would fare. So when I arrived here at around lunchtime, I was probably already fairly tired and certainly quite nervous about what lay ahead. At 5:15pm that afternoon I celebrated Mass in the hospital chapel – my first Mass in the my parish – and some of you were there. It was the feast of the Baptism of the Lord. I remember speaking about how lovely it was that I began my ministry at St Clare's on the very day that the Lord began His public ministry, and hoped that it was a sign He would be accompanying me every step of the way. Five years later, I can honestly say that I think He has, and I pray that He will continue!

So the Feast of the Baptism of the Lord 2017 marked for me a particular transition in my life. But in fact, every year this is a feast which marks a change. Today we leave behind the stories and images of the childhood of Jesus, and meet Him as an adult. For the Lord Himself, He finally leaves behind the hidden years of life in Nazareth and begins His public ministry, His work of preaching, healing and saving God's people. In fact, every baptism is a transition: it marks a change of life. Baptism means leaving behind a life centred on myself and trying to live a life centred on Christ. It means living a life of faith, not merely of experience; it means living a life which is spiritual as well as physical; it means living a life which is not confined to a few decades on this earth, but is eternal.

Jesus' baptism is very different to ours. We receive baptism because we need it to make us holy; Jesus, on the other hand, receives baptism to make it holy for us. The waters of baptism now give life, because the author of life has immersed Himself in these waters. This sacrament is now a channel of the Lord's grace for us. St Luke today gives us just a couple of lines about Jesus' baptism, but this brief account carries some significant details which help us to see what our baptism means too. He says that, when Jesus had been baptised, three things happened: heaven opened, the Holy Spirit descended, and a voice was heard from heaven: "You are my Son, the Beloved; my favour rests on You."

These three things also happen in the wake of our baptism. Heaven is opened. This means that we live with the sure and certain hope of eternal life; we live in such a way as to prepare for that life rather than to be completely consumed by life on earth. The gates of heaven have been opened for us: we live with our eyes fixed on this goal. Because heaven is opened, we can go to the Lord – and He can come to us. And so the Holy Spirit comes to us, too. We receive His inspiration, His guidance, His strength, His power. These help us to live as followers of Jesus. St Luke tells us that the Holy Spirit descended on Jesus "in bodily shape, like a dove." There is a physical manifestation of the Spirit at the start of Jesus' public life. And God continues to come to us, to give us His Spirit and His grace through

physical things. In the water of baptism; the holy oil of baptism, confirmation, ordination and anointing of the sick; in the bread and wine of the Eucharist – God uses these material things to communicate His presence and His grace to us. And, like Jesus, we are invited to hear the Father’s voice telling us, reassuring us, that we are His beloved children. You are His beloved child. Baptism assures us of this truth. We must never forget it!

Perhaps you will say, “but I don’t always experience these things”, or “my faith is weak and I never feel the presence of God.” You would not be alone in saying this. Probably every person has times when they struggle to sense the Lord’s presence and work in their lives. But when I stop and think about it, I can see clearly that the Lord has opened heaven for me; He has called me to make this journey. I can remember many times in which I have felt His presence and grace in the sacraments. I recall with joy moments when I have not doubted that I am His beloved son.

But St Luke gives us another clue as to how we receive these gifts. He tells us that these things happened, “while Jesus was *at prayer* after His own baptism.” The grace has been given in baptism, and the gifts are revealed when we pray. Baptism is not magic: God works through it, but it’s only when we then live our lives open to Him, speaking to Him, listening to Him, that we can really perceive and enjoy the gifts He has given in this sacrament. Baptism initiates a relationship with God, a relationship in which we are His beloved children and He is truly our Father; but a relationship can’t take place in a moment – it is an ongoing reality, or it is not a relationship at all. When I came to St Clare’s five years ago, God was giving me the most incredible array of gifts: a fantastic parish, a supportive and loving community, countless memorable experiences, the opportunity to serve Him in new and fulfilling ways. But it’s only in the years since then, in the day to day building up of relationships, that I have actually experienced these gifts, that I have known just how much God was giving me on 9<sup>th</sup> January 2017. It’s the same with baptism: at the moment of baptism He gives us many gifts, but it takes time for His gifts to be shown forth in our lives. And if we want to know how beautiful and wonderful these gifts are, we need to pray, and pray regularly. We need to nurture that relationship with the Father that He has given us, so that we recognise ourselves as His beloved children. Many times in the Gospel we find Jesus at prayer: He needed that communion with His Father. And if it was necessary for Him, how much more so for us! So I encourage you, especially if you don’t already: pray, and pray regularly. It doesn’t need to be for a long time, but it must be often. Every day at least, even for just a minute or two. And when you take a few moments aside to pray, remember what it is you are really doing in prayer: nurturing that relationship with God which began at baptism and which allows Him to tell you that you are His beloved child, and that He has opened heaven for you.

Fr Andrew

