

Our Baptismal Dignity

Conventual Mass 2020

As we are beginning to read St Matthew's Gospel this year, we might remember how it ends. Our Lord's last words to his disciples on earth were "Go, make disciples of all nations, and baptize them in the name of the Father, of the Son, of the Holy Spirit" (cf. Mt 28:19). If baptism marked the beginning of Jesus' ministry, it also marks the beginning of something new for every believer.

Jesus heads out to the Jordan. *What is he doing there?* Well St Matthew sees him as **retracing** the steps of the children of Israel. They too had passed through the waters of the Red Sea and the Jordan to reach the promised land. And in so doing they discovered themselves as **God's chosen people**, bound by covenant love and **set apart to sing** the praises of God. After passing through the waters, Miriam and all the women picked up the timbrels and started to sing and dance.

Today we began Mass with a reminder our baptism, and it is good to begin this new year remembering **who we are and to whom we belong**. As St John says, speaking of the Christmas mystery of the Word Made Flesh, "to all who did receive him he gave power to become children of God. In recalling our baptism we know ourselves as the beloved sons and daughters of God. And every time we reach for the holy water stoop **we remember, we rediscover** that we are the favoured ones, rooted in Christ and at the same time rooted in one another. To remember our dignity and to live according to our baptism is to seek to become a saint. If the day of our baptism is really the most important day of our life – and it is! – then we should celebrate it.

We live in a world where people often want to privatise faith. 'Yes, I am a Christian, but I don't have to go to church.' It is a private thing between me and God. No, it has never been. We can't baptize ourselves. We are baptised by another into a community of faith. We together, this church, each church, each Christian community witness and worship and celebrate our redemption together. "Once you were not a people at all" said St Peter in his letter, "but now you the people of God."

I don't know if you have been to a baptism recently. In this Church we begin at the door – it is our entry into the Church of God. We move to the font, to be immersed in the life and love of the Triune God – Father, Son and Holy Spirit. And finally the newly baptised comes down here to stand at the front of the altar, because the goal of our baptism is to be nourished at this altar, and to gather to worship the Lord.

The Second Vatican Council wanted to bring the church back to the essential expressions of the faith, and probably where it had most impact for all of us was in the reforms to the liturgy. The Council Fathers said:

It is very much the wish of the church that all the faithful should be led to take that full, conscious, and active part in liturgical celebrations which is demanded by the very nature of the liturgy, and to which the Christian people, "a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a redeemed people" (1 Pet 2:9, 4-5) have a right and to which they are bound by reason of their Baptism. SC14

Let me repeat it: you, the Christian people, by reason of your baptism, and because the liturgy itself demands it, have the right and duty to express your faith, your love and worship of the Lord by taking a full, conscious and active part in the liturgy, in

the Mass. The people of God were not to be silent, passive, spectators while the priest did his thing. The baptised should be active in this celebration.

I read an obituary this week in one of the papers, and it spoke of a prominent Catholic hearing Mass. No. We don't just hear Mass we celebrate Mass. We don't just hear, we raise our voices, we don't just speak, we sing.

There are many ways to play a full, conscious and active part in the liturgy. The first is to gain a deeper awareness of the action of the Mass, the rites and mysteries we celebrate. There are parts that we repeat every time, but other things, like the Liturgy of the Word, vary from Mass to Mass. People engage through various ministries – Readers, Eucharistic Ministers, Servers and the Choir, and through gestures, standing, sitting kneeling, the sign of the Cross and the sign of peace. Full, conscious and active. Have we realised this in our liturgy here at St Francis Xavier's?

One of the greatest ways that the church has always expressed itself is in song. The Church was born singing. Think of Mary singing her Magnificat. Think of the choir of angels at Christmas. The Church was born singing just as the people of Israel, as soon as she crossed the waters of the Red Sea, broke into song led by Miriam.

Church singing is speech raised to a new level. St Augustine said that whoever sings praises twice, and it has been encouraged by the greatest saints. St Ambrose thought it stopped our worship descending into a monotonous boredom, St Benedict thought it brought us in tune with the angels, St Hildegard thought it our divine duty, St Francis thought that song was as a way of communicating the joy of the Gospel. Our faith cannot just be expressed in plain prose, it needs song because song is the time-honoured way of praising, exulting and extolling our great God.

Some people say that Catholics can't sing, as if we are some strange race. I wonder why some people prefer to remain silent when others are singing? Is it a British thing?

A friend in a Midlands parish told me that the priest at Christmas, after a rather feeble effort said to the Congregation. Right! We are going to sing it again. It is only Away in a Manger, after all.

We had some wonderful singing from our Filipinos and Keralans before Christmas. Perhaps it is because of language, for those whose first language is not English, and the hymns and songs are unfamiliar. If that is the starting point the next step is to ask how we can make it easier for everyone to engage and to raise the roof of the church in song, in the worship of our God.

We have an excellent choir that I am sure would welcome new members. But now we have emerged from the other side of covid we need some good singers at every Mass to lead us. Bernard would welcome anyone who would like to join him at the front and form a signing group. Don't be shy!

I am not going to say this again and again, but at the start of the year lets thing how we exercise our baptismal dignity in worship. At the appointed time, open your books, raise you voices and let our worship be a truly beautiful offering to God.