

Homily for Baptism of the Lord

When I was first a priest I was sent up to Carlisle where we had a great parish priest called Greg Turner, who very much did things his own way. When he had some people wanting to join the Church he would gather a group of parishioners to journey with them. For some reason he always invited Joe, who spent most of his time putting people off the Church. I think Joe was included as an additional hurdle you had to cross.

But one of the hurdles many people brought with them, and which I think many of us carry with us even as cradle Catholics sometimes, is how difficult it is to get into heaven.

Now, I am not ignoring the story of the camel passing through the eye of the needle, and I don't think it is without difficulty. But those difficulties are ones we bring ourselves. So let me explain.

Rather than a harsh and judgemental God who lays down all sorts bear-traps to stop us reaching heaven, which some of us imagine, God is only too keen for us to be with him. It is no surprise that the readings today, which all lead up to an account of the baptism of Jesus, are full of God's enthusiasm for us to be him. 'Here is the Lord, coming with power,' he is coming to us. Or in the second reading, 'God's grace has been revealed, and it has made salvation possible for the whole human race.' So God has himself made it possible for us to reach heaven. This means that we do not need to work for our salvation, as St. Paul will say elsewhere, 'this is God's free gift.'

So let's begin this year with a very clear idea of who our God is. God is love and kindness. So when we think about God and think about our faith, we should not do so as if we are entering into some sort of test or examination; as people who are burdened down by worry. No, God has flung the door wide open, or to put it another way, God is knocking at the door of our hearts.

On one of the RCIA meetings in Carlisle (those thinking of joining the Church) there was a young Baptist. And he kept saying, but this is too easy, it has to be harder than this. In fact it does not.

Our reaching heaven is not a struggle but an engagement of mutual love. The question is whether both parties are eager for it. God clearly is. But are we? This is why every prophet calls us back to God. Every prophet invites us to change our ways so that we are open to God's love.

In the first reading God is going even further. The people are so battered down, and have so lost their way, physically and spiritually, in their case as they are in Exile in Babylon and not back in Jerusalem, that God realises that he cannot expect too much from them, he has to go to them and 'console them' first. To get them in the right state of mind before even they can begin to see that they need him.

To get into that state of mind where they are actually looking for something, even if perhaps it is not God as yet.

This is where we find ourselves in the gospel story. The people do realise that something is lacking in their lives and when they hear about John the Baptist they go out to see what he is offering. They are ready for conversion, for the good news, to receive God into their lives. They are 'expectant,' waiting for direction.

And John the Baptist points out Jesus.

It is interesting how Luke describes the story. Jesus has been baptised with the others, but it is when he is at prayer that the heavens open and God recognises him as his Son, my Beloved.

I think Luke is saying something to us here. We are all of us, most anyway, baptised here in church today. But this is not the end of our story.

It is as if when a couple get married they can sit back and say, 'Well, job done, it is going to be plain sailing from here on.' I think most of you who have been married will know it is not like that. A good marriage takes continuous work to build the relationship.

So it is with us and Jesus. Just like in any marriage, where each will find itself in a different place to another. Each requires different things at different times. Each can get stuck in a rut or become complacent.

And our relationship with God is the same. We do not have to struggle to get into heaven. That door is open to us. But we do have to respond to the love God showers on us, and everything that Jesus does from this moment on as he sets out into the world is trying to help us to do this.

As I said, God is never laying down hurdles for us. God is only trying to help us find the way through what can be a labyrinth of life.

So at the beginning of the year, not comparing ourselves to anyone else, and praying all the time that God will help us, we need to assess where we are. At what point in our relationship do we find ourselves now. Are we growing in faith? Are we finding ourselves getting to know Jesus better? Are we relying on the power of the Holy Spirit to steer us in the right direction? Are we praying?

I know this does sound like the beginning to a Penitential Rite, and that is true, but it is nothing more than good spiritual stock-taking.

Can you imagine the joy on Jesus' face when he hears those words from the Father, his Father. That sense of acknowledgement and love. 'You are my Beloved, my favour rests on you.'

A great prayer to begin this year, and as children of God each of us is entitled to pray it, is to sit down quietly, and simply say to ourselves,

'I am God's child, his Beloved, and God's favour rests on me.'