

Baptism of the Lord

While people throughout Australia are trying to take in the impact of the bushfires that have burnt to much of our country, they are asking the question, “What can we learn from this?” It is a question that we need to ask often. It is a question that we need to ask whenever we have experienced things that have affected our lives. It is a good question to ask when we relive an event in the life of Jesus. We can well ask the question, “What can we learn from this? as today we relive the Baptism of the Lord.

I think Jesus wants us first to learn of his union with us. Jesus emerges out of the crowd of sinful humanity and asks for Baptism from John. John protests to Jesus that he is the one who should be baptised by Jesus. “Leave it like this for the time being; it is fitting that we should in this way do all that righteousness demands.”

“Righteousness” is a constant theme in Matthew’s gospel. Someone is righteous when they are doing what they believe God wants them to do. Jesus chooses to be baptised because this is what God wants him to do. He expresses his complete union with sinful humanity by submitting to John’s baptism. It is but a prelude to the way that Jesus will do what God wants him to do by submitting to suffering and death on the cross, when he

takes on the sinfulness of humanity and wins salvation for us all.

As soon as Jesus comes out of the water, the heavens are torn apart and the Spirit of God comes and descends upon him. I think we can learn from this that the long drought of communication between God and his people has been broken. Just as the Spirit hovered over the waters of creation, the Spirit comes again in the form of a dove to signal the new creation that Jesus will bring about. He had come to form a new people of God who will live as God wants them to live.

And the voice of God is heard proclaiming, “This is my Son, the Beloved; my favour rests on him.” We can learn the identity and the mission of Jesus from what is spoken from heaven. There are three elements in those words, drawn from three different parts of the Hebrew Scriptures. Jesus is the Son of God. This echoes what we read about David the king as being the adopted Son of God in Psalm 2. He is the “beloved” of God as Isaac was described in Genesis 22. Jesus is the “one in whom God is well pleased” as described in the Servant Songs of Isaiah. Jesus fulfils what we read there. We read the first of those servant songs today. “Here is my servant whom I uphold, my chosen one in whom my soul delights. I have endowed him with my spirit that he may bring true justice to the nations.” The tenderness of the care that

Jesus has for us in our weakness and sinfulness is captured by those words, “He does not break the crushed reed, nor quench the wavering flame.” We have seen too many images of crushed buildings and fierce flames in these recent weeks. But these are much gentler images here. How often have we felt like a crushed reed without much life and strength in us? How often have we felt that the flame of faith that God has shared with us was wavering and in danger of being blown out? Jesus knows that we feel like that at times and he gently brings us back to life with him. He is particularly close when we feel crushed by suffering and disappointment.

In today’s reading from the Acts of the Apostles we hear Peter tell Cornelius about Jesus who “after John has been preaching baptism God had anointed him with the Holy Spirit and with power and because God was with him, Jesus went about doing good and curing all who had fallen into the power of the devil.”

The marvellous thing that we can take from all this is that Jesus became one with us so that we could become one with him. What we hear God saying to Jesus we can hear God saying to us. Through our Baptism we have become the beloved Sons and Daughters of God. God’s Spirit rests upon us as it did upon Jesus. But we need to understand that when we become identified with Jesus we get caught up in his ministry. That is what we read

from the Prophet Isaiah today: “I the Lord have called you to serve the cause of right; I have taken you by the hand and formed you. I have appointed you as covenant of the people and light of the nations.”

Most of us find it difficult to see ourselves described like this. We know that we are capable of doing good things because God works through us. We know that we make God’s love present by the love we share with one another. But our lives are messy. Our sinfulness gets in the way of God using us as we and God would want.

I think we need to hear God say to us that he is an artist who can make beautiful things out of rough wood. He is a craftsman who can work with poor instruments. He is the potter who reforms the broken clay.

As we celebrate the Baptism of the Lord today we celebrate our Baptism too and ask our God to renew his loving union with him. Pope Francis has often asked us to learn the date of their Baptism and celebrate it like a feast day. Perhaps that is one more thing that we can learn from reliving the Baptism of the Lord.