



The Baptism of the Lord January 9, 2011 A

JESUS' BAPTISM AND OURS

The following two reflections by Fr. Flor McCarthy S.D.B. are taken from *New Sunday & Holy Day Liturgies—Year A*.

The call to service

Nelson Mandela will go down as one of the greatest leaders of this century. He was instrumental in ending apartheid and bringing about a multiracial society in South Africa. Mandela belongs to the Xhosa people. And grew up in the Transkei. But how did he come to play such a crucial role in the history of his country?

In his autobiography, *Long Walk to Freedom* (1994, Little, Brown and Company), he tells us that all the currents of his life were taking him away from the Transkei. Yet he had no epiphany, no singular revelation, no moment of truth. He says:

A steady accumulation of insights helped me to see that my duty was to the people as a whole, not just to a particular section of it. The memory of a thousand indignities produced in me an anger, a rebelliousness, a desire to fight the system that imprisoned my people. There was no particular day on which I said, henceforth I will devote myself to the liberation of my people; instead I simply found myself doing so, and could not do otherwise.

Jesus was thirty years old when he began his public ministry. How did he come to that decision and why did he wait so long to begin the real work of his life? The simple answer is: prior to this he wasn't ready. Jesus was a teacher, not of a subject such as history which can be learnt out of books, but of religion, or better, spirituality. Spirituality has to be lived before it can be taught effectively. This is why time is important. Before the age of about thirty, what experience has a person to draw on?

In Nazareth he was able to grow quietly in the shadows. There were no pressures. No burden of expectations. There was no hurry—many things are ruined by haste. The main influences in his life would have been home, school, and synagogue.

The first thirty years he spent at Nazareth were not a waste of valuable time. They were crucial importance to

him. During those years he was growing, maturing, and ripening. The day he was baptized by John he didn't suddenly become a different person. 'No single event can awaken in us a stranger completely unknown to us.' (Antoine de Saint Exupery). On that day he began to reap the harvest from what had been growing within him, on that day he answered another call.

The desire to give himself to serving his brothers and sisters of the wider community did not come to him suddenly. It had been sounding inside him during his years in his homeland of Nazareth. Nevertheless, baptism was a very special moment in his life. This was the moment when he decided to commit himself to it and begin it.

There is a great lesson for us in all of this. We must not write off any part of our lives as useless, or any experience as a waste. Everything gives us an opportunity to grow. Life calls for a lot of patient waiting. But we must not wait for something great to happen. We must live the present moment to the full. The future is contained in the present. The future will be the blossoming of the present.

We too are called to grow in wisdom and grace. It took Jesus thirty years to reach maturity and to acquire wisdom. It will take us a lifetime to grow, to mature, and to ripen as human beings and children of God.

The feast of the baptism of Jesus reminds us of our own baptism, and provides us with an opportunity to commit ourselves once again to the Christian life, which is essentially a life of service.

We are not called to save the world, or to solve all its problems. Nevertheless, each of us has our own unique call, in our families, in our work, in our world. We need God's help to be able to be faithful to that call. Faithfulness to small, everyday tasks is our way of responding to the problems of our time and participating in the work of Jesus.

Moment of revelation and confirmation

Times of change (e.g. Change of one's career, change of one's way of life) are times of risk and uncertainty. At such times people become very vulnerable. What they need most is someone to give them support and encouragement.

When the American writer, Maya Angelou, was growing up she didn't see her mother very much. She was brought up in great part by her grandmother, a wonderful and saintly woman. She tells how when she was twenty years old, she took a trip to San Francisco to visit her mother. It was a particularly important yet vulnerable moment in Maya's life: she was struggling to make her way in life and groping her way towards becoming a writer.

She had quite a good meeting with her mother. When it was time to leave, her mother walked her down the hill to the waiting bus. As they parted, her mother said, 'You know, I think you are the greatest woman I have ever met.'

Years later Maya could still recall the moment vividly. She said, 'Waiting for the bus, is sat there thinking: Just suppose she's right. Suppose I really am somebody. It was one of those moments when the sky rolled back. At times like that, it's almost as if the whole earth holds its breath.'

Maya went on to become a highly successful and respected writer and poet. She composed and delivered an inspiring poem at the inauguration of President Clinton.

Prior to his baptism Jesus had lived for thirty years at Nazareth. It had been an uneventful life (as far as we can tell). Nevertheless, during those years he had begun to hear another call—a call away from Nazareth, a call to the service of his brothers and sisters in the wider community. So finally he left Nazareth.

When he appeared before John to be baptized, he had reached a crossroads in his life. He had left behind him the comparatively quiet life of Nazareth, and was about to embark on his public mission. No doubt he came to that moment after a lot of prayer and reflection. Nevertheless, it can't have been easy for him. He must have experienced some uncertainty and anxiety. He needed affirmation.

During his baptism Jesus received that affirmation. He heard the wonderful words: 'You are my beloved son; with you I am well pleased.' these words also set the seal of divine approval on the mission he was about to begin, the mission to bring sinners back to God.

The heavenly Father's words of affirmation put wind in his sails. Not only did he receive approval from on high for his mission, but he also received power from on high for it. This is signified by the descent of the Holy Spirit. The Spirit was not just given for that moment; the Spirit remained with him throughout his public ministry.

This feast in which we recall the baptism of Jesus reminds us of our own baptism, and renews its grace within us. From a spiritual point of view, baptism is the greatest thing that can happen to us. What happened at the baptism of Jesus happens at our baptism too. God calls us by name, he says to each of us, 'You are my beloved son,' or 'You are my beloved daughter.' and the Spirit descends on us, because we too are given a mission: to participate in the work of Jesus.

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Breathe on me breath of God

**Breathe on me, breath of God,
fill me with life anew,
that I may love the things you love,
and do what you would do.**

**Breathe on me, breath of God,
until my heart is pure,
until with you I have one will,
to live and to endure.**

**Breathe on me, breath of God,
my soul with grace refine,
until this earthly part of me
glows with your fire divine.**

**Breathe on me, breath of God,
so I shall never die,
but live with you the perfect life
in your eternity.**

(Liturgy of the Hours)

Have a blessed week,

