

Homily for the Baptism of Jesus 2010

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As we have been celebrating Christmas for two weeks in Church, in the world around us the commercial frenzy that started the day after Thanksgiving came to an end after Christmas Day. On December 26th the radio stations and store Muzak stopped playing Christmas music. On TV stations the usual grind of gratuitous violence and tales of recreational sex has replaced the oh-so-warm-and-fuzzy holiday entertainments. And so the cultural remnant of Christendom we call “Christmas cheer” has given way to the usual twin driving forces in the world: Fear and pleasure.

Our feast reminds us today that this is not the way it has to be. We human beings are capable of so many wonderful qualities. It is not inevitable that dread or self-absorption push all virtues aside. The glow of the specifically *Christian* celebration of Christmas can become a blazing fire within us that drives away the shadows of soul-numbing fear and fatuous fads. The light of Christ is not overcome by the darkness, but instead it overcomes even the darkest nights of despair and reveals the emptiness of selfish living. Today we fast-forward 30 years from Jesus’ birth in Bethlehem to the beginning of his public epiphany to the world. Today we are called to change our ordinary lives into extraordinary witnesses to the gritty love that fuels our passion and directs our deeds.

I say “gritty love” because a love so great that it willingly leads to the Cross is not wishy-washy. It’s not just a companionable jolliness that vanishes at the first irritating person who crosses our path. It amounts to taking the message of the Christmas season seriously and making it *the* guiding principle of our lives. Then the love of God instilled in our hearts through this Gospel is a wide-awake, stare-down-the-Devil level of love. This is not just theory. This is what gives Christianity its practical power for transformation. It is a committed faith that assures us that we will not miss out if we don’t experience every possible

pleasure. It is a confident faith that assures us that even if frightful things confront us, we can carry on without undue fear.

Last year at this time I shared with you my favorite quote by the British author Dorothy L. Sayers. She was a friend of C. S. Lewis and J. R. R. Tolkien, and is mostly remembered today for her series of murder mysteries featuring the detective Lord Peter Wimsey. But I like to use a quote from her 1941 BBC radio Christmas play “Kings in Judea.” In her BBC radio Christmas play “Kings in Judea,” she has Balthasar, one of the Magi, say this:

Fear is our daily companion - the fear of want, the fear of war, the fear of cruel death, and of still more cruel life. But all this we could bear if we knew that we did not suffer in vain; that God was beside us in the struggle, sharing the miseries of His own world. For the riddle that torments the world is this: shall Sorrow and Love be reconciled at last, when the promised Kingdom comes?

This line must have carried quite a punch in that dark year of World War II. Maybe it carries a similar pathos for us today, living in one of the worst economic crises of recent times, all the while bankrupting ourselves by fighting two foreign wars. Even if you haven't suffered any major tragedies recently, there is much fear and uncertainty in the air. But as Church, we pray in the cycle of the liturgical seasons our belief that Jesus himself is the Christian answer to our troubled hearts.

We can bear the miseries of the world, knowing that God in Christ shares them. Our faith and trust is indeed that Sorrow and Love shall be reconciled at last. This is the ultimate good that God will bring out of the evil in the world. The big picture of world process is beyond our ken, no matter how far-reaching our science and our cosmological speculations may go. But Jesus took the baptismal rite of John the Baptist and made it his own for the remission of the sins of those who would become his own, the Church. It is his sacrifice on the Cross that we offer again to God the Father at every Mass. On the Cross God was

in Christ, reconciling the world. We threw our worst at the incarnate God, but through his execution comes the salvation of the world.

This is our faith. This is what we the Church say as we pray our seasonal liturgies. This is the truth that can satisfy our hearts: that in the end God the Father will reconcile his goodness and love with our greatest of sorrows and even our greatest sins. Knowing that, we can light our spheres of influence with a bit more love, a lot less fear, and a truly forgiving heart.