

BAPTISM OF THE LORD HOMILY 2022
CONTINUING THE UNIVERSAL MESSAGE OF GOOD NEWS FOR ALL
“God’s manifestation in Jesus and ourselves” (Claude Mostowik MSC)
Lk 3.15-22 Is 42.1-7 Titus 2.11-14, 3.4-7
Jesus is God’s Son (The Rhyme Bible)

Who said this? *“Do your little bit of good where you are; it is those little bits of good put all together that overwhelm the world.”* In 1999, my second year as parish priest of Asquith, on Sydney’s North Shore, a formal invitation arrived, addressed to *Reverend and Mrs Hannon*, to the presentation of the Sydney Peace Prize at Sydney Uni. It sounded like a good idea at the time, so I rang Mum in Melbourne, and she had no hesitation in agreeing to join me for the event. I never did discover how it happened, or who put me on the invitation list, but it was certainly a worthwhile occasion, and a privilege to attend.

The award went to Archbishop Desmond Tutu, who, in his characteristic style and with his enduring smile, happily accepted the award, danced across the stage, and gave a memorable speech, laced with humour, even if I can’t remember the details! His capacity for laughter was to the fore as well, despite the serious and dark nature of the subject of which he spoke, naturally, primarily, the evils of apartheid, and the necessity for dealing with the truth of the human rights abuses perpetrated as a result, and seeking a way of moving forward together, in a reconciled and complex society of South Africa, which he often spoke of, in colourful terms, as a *“rainbow nation.”* And it’s not as if all the problems are now solved! It’s a long-term evolving process, as it is for our own society here in Australia.

At the time, Tutu was chairman of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, founded by President Nelson Mandela, who, himself, had endured 27 years (can you imagine it, some 10,000 days!), in solitary confinement at times, but who emerged with no evident rancour or desire for revenge, but rather sought common ground, and, what might be called, restorative justice, through the work of the Commission, led by Desmond Tutu. Then, just this week, was the death of another pioneer for black rights, the great actor Sidney Poitier, whom we can remember as star of *“Guess Who’s Coming to Dinner”*, *“To Sir, with Love”*, *“The Lilies of the Field”* and many other top movies? Poitier’s contribution to human rights and to countering endemic racism should not go without acknowledgement either.

Of these figures, Tutu is a standout, in the way he translated Gospel principles into action and achieved essential change in a grossly unjust society, in non-violent and practical ways, his force of personality and capacity for common sense persuasion, effectively transforming people’s prior prejudices and expectations along the way.

He took the call of Christian Baptism to heart and lived it out, leading the way, at the same time as an influential Church leader, from within, being the first black African Bishop of Johannesburg and then Archbishop of Cape Town to 1996. Whilst he wrote many books, he was not just a person of ideas but of action and an agent of change. We learn much from such a person of conviction and faith. And he would never have claimed to have been a perfect Christian, very much conscious and open about his own flaws and failures in life.

Well, this weekend we have a paradoxical feast in a way, where the Baptism of Jesus is recorded in the Gospels of Mark, Matthew and Luke, but John’s Gospel only refers to John the Baptist seeing the Spirit descend from heaven as a dove upon Jesus, and remain on him. We can guess that John the evangelist was wary of describing Jesus being baptized by John the Baptist, for fear of seeming inferior. Then there was the concern of Jesus not needing baptism, as he was not a sinner in any way! For the others, it seems to be about continuity, as Jesus being his public ministry, John having prepared the way as we say, and inaugurating this new time of Good News. The signs are there in the Baptist’s preaching of repentance, good news for the poor and a time of hope, fulfilled in the coming and person of Jesus, whose message is along the same lines of a call to faith, forgiveness, healing and renewal. Jesus is not to use water, but the refining and purifying agents of the Holy Spirit and the image of fire (not to be taken literally!).

Brendan Byrne SJ sees a theological angle here, noting *“the ‘trinitarian’ dimension of the scene: the divine communion of love, that is the Trinity (Father, Son and Spirit) is operative, not in heavenly remoteness, but*

her on earth at the Jordan river. The mission of the Son which will be to draw human beings back into the warmth of the Father's home, into the 'fire' of that divine communication of love." We are all called to hear the words of the Father, that we are his people, in whom he is well pleased too, if we respond as faithful disciples to the responsibilities of our baptismal commitment on our journey of life.

One thing that struck me this time was the presence of the dove, described as having a *'polyvalent nature'* (as the JBC puts it, somewhat chemically!), symbolizing peace and gentleness, *"as well as the hopes of men and women for love, life and union with God. These hopes are now realized in Jesus, who in the Spirit breaks down barriers that separate people from life, and who, raised from the dead, will... send the life of the promised Spirit upon those who call upon his name."*

And so, in the end, it's all about our Baptism too. Where are we in all of this, trying to live the message in our own lives, not just in prayer, but in active response as well. So I conclude where I began, quoting the late Archbishop Desmond Tutu's Gospel reminder: ***"Do your little bit of good where you are; it is those little bits of good put all together that overwhelm the world."***

john hannon

9th January 2022