

Thinking of Baptism?

It may sound a bit strange to equate the sacrament of baptism with today's Gospel, but Jesus himself points this out to us. I'm sure that Jesus would have had no notion of the liturgy of Baptism as it has now developed, yet it is fair to say that he regarded the actuality of baptism as something essential, after all he himself submitted to it from John and in so doing brought to it that sacramental essence which allows each person who is baptised to encounter Jesus. How does this happen and what has it got to do with fire?

Of itself the symbolism of fire is somewhat under played in the liturgy of baptism and that is a shame because what fire at baptism relates to is the fire of the Paschal Candle and thereby to the resurrection. After all the anointing with water and oil, and after the symbolic re-clothing there comes the moment when the minister takes the baptismal candle and lights it from the already aflame Paschal Candle and then passes this light to the neophyte's godparent to be held as a symbol of the light of the Risen Lord present to the newly baptised. This candle is to be kept burning and the newly baptised is to bring this candle with him (her) along to the Easter Vigil when it is to be lit once more during the ceremony of light, and during the blessing of the baptismal water. In fact each baptised person is meant to bring their own baptismal candle with them so that they too can light it once more and renew the promises that were made by them or by their godparents on their behalf.

This is the night when the pillar of fire destroyed the darkness of sin...a pillar of fire that glows to the honour of God. Let it mingle with the lights of heaven and continue bravely burning to dispel the darkness of this night.

This is what the Deacon sings as the baptised, with their candles alight gather around the true light of life, Christ; *the Morning Star who came back from the dead and shed his peaceful light on all mankind.*

It is by making these connections between our faith and our lives that we are able to see and comprehend the meaning of what Jesus says in the gospel. It would be so easy for us to see and hear these words as troublesome and uncharacteristic of Jesus, as if he were trying to stir up division and hatred simply for the sake of it. Rather what he is urgently seeking to do is to tell his disciples of the reality which awaits them because of what they have chosen. However, unless we grasp the context of this it sounds perplexing. The context is his passion death and resurrection, and the division of which he speaks comes with our decision to follow him. Jesus is telling us that this decision will cause much soul searching when choices have to be made.

The choice to follow him began with our baptism and we need to be aware of this. We need a change of mentality, a change which informs us that it is no longer sufficient to say that I have been baptised but one which affirms that I am baptised. In other words we need to make our baptism an active reality in our lives and not an historic one. It will only happen when we see the fire of that candle burning in our lives and acting in the way that fire does; by destroying what was stale and old and allowing something new to appear.