WE “ARE” (NOT “WERE”) BAPTIZED

The beginning of a new year, the month of January and putting away the last items and details of the Christmas Season is a good time for housecleaning and getting rid of useless things. Friends of mine have talked a lot about streamlining and cleaning up the clutter that has accumulated over time. A lot of people would like to simplify their personal space as well as their lives, and get rid of excess – excess pounds, excess stuff in the garage and closet, excess anxieties that weigh us down and prevent us from a freer way of getting through each day. It’s always easier said than done, as all of us know too well, but there are a lot of things we’d like to dispose of.

As I was straightening out my home office I was surprised to see how many pieces of computer equipment were lying around gathering dust. They’re no longer useful; they’ve been replaced by something, smaller, faster, or more convenient. All the little boxes that served as connecting points between machines are useless, since now most everything is wireless. Dozens of plastic discs in the back of drawers get tossed out, because now they’re obsolete since the “cloud” – wherever that is -- allows us to store information without the fear of it getting lost. Cases, zip drives, old computers, miles of wires... all worth nothing and disqualified for service. It was obviously time to get rid of some of those things.

If you listen closely to today’s scripture passage from Isaiah, you’ll realize that disposability is not a modern problem. The ancient world got rid of useless things too. Isaiah speaks of breaking a bruised reed and quenching a smoldering wick. There were many uses for reeds in ancient times. They were woven into mats, bound together into boats, used to thatch roofs, and even formed into shoes. They made fine musical instruments, and, because of their straightness, uniformity and strength, were used as measuring rods, balance beams in scales, and household lamp stands. But... any bruise or imperfection on a reed disqualified it from service because the flaw indicated a problem that would weaken the final product. So such a reed was broken and discarded so that it wouldn’t be used by mistake.

Wicks were the light bulbs of the ancient world. They were used in oil lamps to provide light. And, just like light bulbs, they burned out occasionally and had to be replaced (like the wick on this oil candle next to the lectern). When the flame in the oil lamp died because of carbon build-up in the fibers of the wick, it was pinched out and thrown away. (Recall the gospel image of the salt that lost its flavor and became useless; it was then good for nothing except to be thrown out and trampled underfoot.) So the ancient world had its own list of disposable commodities, and the scripture author uses them insightfully as a metaphor in describing a mysterious figure -- a chosen servant of the Lord who will come to bring the people freedom and release, who will be a light shining in their darkness. This chosen one will NOT break the bruised reed, will NOT quench the smoldering wick. He will not destroy; he will restore.
The Christian community has always seen in this mysterious figure -- this Servant of the Lord -- a foretelling of Jesus, whose baptism in the Jordan we celebrate today as the final event in our Christmas epiphany. In the Kingdom of God which Jesus came to announce, there are no throw-aways. In him the bruised reed is healed, straightened and strengthened. In him a smoldering wick is cleaned, trimmed and re-lighted. All are given the gift of fullness of life -- from the greatest to the least. In John’s gospel Jesus says: *I did not come to condemn the world, but to save it.* Jesus was baptized into the mission of forgiveness and compassion. He invites us who were baptized to join him in taking away the sin of the world, in healing the broken-hearted, in lifting heavy burdens from people’s lives, and establishing a reign of justice, freedom and peace for all people.

Our Lord doesn’t stand apart from the sick or the sinner, the bruised or the broken. He wades in the water with them. The baptism of Jesus was not for the forgiveness of his sins -- Jesus is the sinless One. The heavens opened and the voice declared: *You are my beloved Son; in you I am well pleased.* Jesus is one with the heavenly Father. But he submits himself to the baptism of John to make it clear why he came -- to identify with us, to affirm our relationship with God as beloved children, to show us how to live with God’s kingdom as our goal and God’s love as our means to that goal. There is a distinct difference between the baptism of Jesus in the Jordan River and our baptism. The gospels interpret Jesus’ baptism as more of a coronation than a conversion. The voice declares him to be God’s Son, giving him a sense of identity and purpose.

For us, however, our baptism signifies a dying and rising with Jesus so as to embark on a whole new life and a whole new way of living in the world, which the gospels describe as the “Kingdom of God.” For us, formation, not coronation, is what baptism is all about. We are not made better than anyone else by our baptism. With Christ, we’re made the servants of all. We’re given an orientation to life so radical, so countercultural, so against the grain, that the New Testament can only describe it as death to an old way of life, and birth to a new. As one author puts it: *Because the gospel is a way of thinking and being in the world that does not come naturally, we must be born again, and again!*

Recall the scene from the play “The Miracle Worker.” Deaf and blind from the age of nineteen months, seven-year-old Helen Keller had learned the finger spelling of many words during the four months since meeting her partially blind teacher, Annie Sullivan. But Helen didn’t connect them with any reality. One day in 1892 when they were passing a water pump near the farmhouse, Annie placed Helen’s hand under the running water and pressed into it the word: W-A-T-E-R. From that moment Helen became a “new creation” who would begin to connect the alphabet of the deaf with real objects, and she became a person who would amaze and inspire so many through her work for people with disabilities, especially the visually impaired.
As we conclude this Christmas Cycle with the solemnity of the Baptism of the Lord, “water” is the word that we should press into our Christian consciousness and hearts. We ARE – not were – baptized. We’re called into new connections between the reality of our world and the water of our baptism. Do we respond with blessing for God’s gifts to us as his baptized people? Do we discard attitudes, opinions, prejudices that are not fit for members of the Body of Christ? Do we really believe that God shows no partiality and so respects all people, no matter what their religion, ethnicity or culture? Do we support the weak and needy, not “breaking the bruised reed or quenching the smoldering wick”? Are we a church of a shepherding God with a care for the poor and helpless? Day after day, we are called to become what we are: people of the water and the Holy Spirit, called by name to bring forth in our world the justice, reconciliation and enlightenment of Christ, the beloved of God.

_Father John Kasper, OSFS_