

Baptism of the Lord B (Jan. 10, 2021- STM: All Masses)

Satoko Kitahara was a wealthy young woman who lived in Tokyo in the years after World War II. She was well-educated, spoke several languages, played the piano, and was trained as a pharmacologist.

But she lived in a city in ruins. Some of the poorest people Tokyo, mostly widows and orphans, lived near the river in a place that came to be called “Ant Town,” because the people were considered as insignificant as insects.

In 1949, while walking through the city, Satoko decided, out of curiosity, to follow a group of nuns into a Catholic church – and was transfixed by what she saw. Something touched her very deeply and spoke to her heart. She was especially moved by a statue of the Blessed Mother and asked one of the nuns who she was. She kept going back to the church and, several months later, at the age of 20, Satoko — a Shinto Buddhist — asked to be baptized.

After that, everything changed. A life of wealth and comfort became less important.

One day, a missionary took her to Ant Town — and Satoko was stunned. She lived less than a mile away but had never seen that kind of poverty. She began spending more time with the people, even helping them pick out rags and junk to sell.

Eventually, she decided that she had to leave her family’s comfortable home and live among the poor. She said: “To save us, God sent his only Son to be one of us. He became one of us. It hit me,” she explained, “that there was only one way to help these rag-picker children. And it was to become a rag picker like them.”

And so, she did. She worked tirelessly for Japan’s suffering children – and eventually began to suffer herself. She died of tuberculosis, at the age of 28. Many today are praying she will one day be named a saint.

My dear sisters and brothers in Christ Jesus, today we gather to celebrate the Baptism of the Lord as we bring the Christmas season to its end. As we do so, we focus on another epiphany of the Lord. Jesus chose to be baptized. He did not have to be baptized. However, by doing so, what does Jesus show? He shows forth the reason that incarnation happened, the reason why God became man. God sent His son to be one of us. He came into this world of poor ragpickers and saw something beautiful. There was nothing beneath God. How wonderful an image is that? There was nothing beneath God. Jesus entered into the waters of baptism to show his solidarity with sinners, to show that He was here to walk among, with God’s holy people. He would walk with those who were hurting, betrayed, abused, mocked. He would walk with the poor and the abandoned. He would be with immigrants who seek a better life. He would console widows and widowers who lose their beloved. He would comfort parents who experience the death of a child. Jesus would walk with the person drenched in sin who seeks new life. This is who God is for us. This is the one who we have named “Emmanuel” time and time again the Advent and Christmas season. The difference of

Christianity is that God became man. God came to earth. God did want heaven without us, so Jesus brought heaven down. And this incarnate God has walked with us ever since. This is the God we have. This is the God that we celebrate today.

Today is a day for us to grasp what the incarnation means for us--each of us; the mixing of divinity and humanity means. For that is what happened God and us---comingling. We are forever caught up in God and God is forever caught up in us. The lover and the beloved together. When we are baptized, we enter ever so deeply into that divine love. Baptism forever changes us. I love how we normally celebrate baptism in this church during the Easter Vigil-by immersion. We probably will not be able to do so this year again but the symbolism of baptism by immersion is important. The Elect enter the waters of baptism as one person and emerge from it as someone else. I love to lead the Elect down into the font, plunging them under the water and watching the expression on their face as they come up, taking in that first breath of air. The neophyte then exits the font, dripping wet with the water of new life, a new creation, part of the divinity of Christ. Baptism makes us part of God. How beautiful of an image is that? Even on our worst day, when we may be feeling down or ugly or abandoned or sick or fearful, we are part of God. This is what incarnation teaches us. This is what baptism teaches us. God could not stay away from his people any longer. God comes down. Heaven comes down. Life is forever changed. St. Therese of Lisieux, in her poem "To Our Lady of Victories", describes baptism like this:

*Through Him, the holy waters of Baptism
Will make of the tiny little newborn babe
The temple where God Himself
Deigns to dwell in his love.*

Baptism makes us the temple of God. God comes to dwell in our house.

This incorporation into the life of Christ, this becoming part of God and God becoming part of us, makes us part of a community as well. We have been made for each other. We have been made for community. We have found our home here in the Catholic Church and in this parish community, this manifestation of the Body of Christ. We need this Church. We need this parish. We need each other. If COVID has taught us anything, it is a reminder of the essential need of community, the essential need to be connected to other people through a common means. For us, it is Christ, it is Eucharist, it is the life we find here. God came from heaven to save us. We live out that salvation, we work on it, here amid this community of faith, surrounded by people who love us and who we love. We walk together through good and bad. We share in each other's joys and sadness. We sometimes struggle to love but this place and the gospel always reminds us of the true nature of love. Incarnation teaches us that God loves and loves immensely and has come to be one with us-to walk with us and to teach us how to walk with and, most of all, how to love.

Baptism was a beginning for us. But it was not the end. Baptism put us on this path that we walk. Jesus was baptized to show his oneness with us. This epiphany of Christ reminds us of the beloved-ness of the Son and hence the beloved-ness of each of us. Through baptism, we accept the call to be good and faithful and active disciples. We strive to better at loving. We strive to be other centered. We accept that each of us shares in the universal call to holiness as we strive to one day share in the beatific vision of God.

Today is a good day to think about your own baptism. I tell you each year, go and find out the day on which you were baptized if you do not already know. It is an important day in your life, the most important day. For on that day, you became part of the life of this God who could not stand to have heaven without us. This is the God who came down and dwelt among the least. This is the God who became incarnate and showed us how to live and how to love. May the grace of baptism be renewed in each of us. Amen.