

## **The Baptism of our Lord – January 9<sup>th</sup> 2022**

### **A Reflection by Fr Sylvester O’Flynn OFM Cap., Rochestown, Cork**

#### **Set the world on fire**

This Sunday we celebrate the baptism of Jesus in the River Jordan, marking the beginning of his public ministry. He has emerged from the thirty years of what we call his hidden life. Since Jesus was without sin, he did not need to submit himself to the ceremonial bathing that John the Baptist offered as a sign of repentance. In Matthew’s Gospel we read how John tried to dissuade Jesus, saying that he should be baptised by Jesus. But Jesus replied, “Leave it like this for the time being; it is fitting that we should, in this way, do all that uprightness demands.” By entering the water in solidarity with repentant sinners, he was showing that the mission he was about to begin would be one of mercy, forgiveness and hope.

#### **Baptised with the Holy Spirit and fire**

John the Baptist, the one who was to prepare the way, told people that he baptised with water, but the one coming after him would baptise with the Holy Spirit and fire. This year, our Sunday Gospels will be taken mostly from Luke who is the evangelist of the Holy Spirit, of prayer and mercy. He has already told us of the coming of the Holy Spirit to Mary, Elizabeth, Zechariah and Simeon. Luke tells us that Jesus, after his baptism, was at prayer when the Holy Spirit descended upon him in bodily shape, like a dove. Our ceremony of baptism begins with asking the name of the child. A voice from heaven named Jesus as the Beloved Son of God. With this identification he is ready to commence his public mission.

#### **The apostles were fired up at Pentecost**

On Pentecost Day the Holy Spirit descended on the disciples in the form of tongues of fire. They were transformed by the fire of wisdom, the gift of tongues, extraordinary courage and enthusiasm. The mission of Jesus had now become the mission of the newly-born Church. The apostles were sent to the ends of the Earth to preach to all people and to baptise them in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit.

The ceremony of baptism is sometimes called Christening. This is a more powerful name. A person is CHRIST-ENED, now sharing in the life of Christ and his mission. “But to all who did accept him he gave power to become children of God” (John 1:12). To become means to grow continually just as an acorn becomes an oak tree. After the baptism with water, the newly baptised is christened by anointing with the oil of chrism. Then a flame taken from the paschal candle of the Risen Lord sets fire to one’s personal candle. The grace received in baptism is a tiny spark that has to be fanned into flame. Saint Paul encouraged Timothy to “fan into flame the gift of God that you possess through the laying on of my hands. God did not give us a spirit of timidity, but the Spirit of power and love and self-control” (2 Tim 1:6-7). Have we fanned the tiny flicker of our baptismal candle into a life of fire and light?

#### **A question to ponder**

Here is a question to ponder. If you were on trial for being a Christian, would there be enough evidence in your life to convict you?

Writing at the start of the new millennium, twenty-two years ago, Saint John Paul II identified three problem areas that would have to be faced in pastoral planning: mediocrity, settling for a minimalistic ethic and a shallow religiosity.

An example of mediocrity can be seen here in Ireland in wanting the fast Mass, coming in late and leaving before the last blessing. Did you hear about the man who was asked, “What was the sermon about today?” He replied, “About ten minutes!” The clock was more important than the message. That’s mediocrity in a nutshell.

The minimalistic ethic guy says that if he can get past Saint Peter by his fingernails, that will do. Shallow religiosity is a certain curiosity about spiritual matters without any commitment. “I’m very spiritual but not religious.” There is a warning message in Revelation. “I know about your activities: how you are neither cold nor hot. I wish you were one or the other, but since you are neither hot nor cold, but only lukewarm, I will spit you out of my mouth” (Rev 3:15-16). Jesus told us that if the salt loses its taste, it is good for nothing but to be cast out and trodden underfoot.

### **The turning of the tide**

Here in secularised Europe, the Church is experiencing a winter of recession. But it is important to remember that in other parts of the world the Church is flourishing. When Covid-19 is eradicated, how many will return to Mass? There are very few priests under the normal age for retirement and only a tiny number of seminarians to fill the gaps.

The tide is still going out. When will it turn and flow in again? Will it turn? I believe it will. The ebbing tide has produced a world of addictions, anxiety, boredom, suicides, lack of direction, living in the virtual or fictional world more than the real world. The tide will turn when people see what faith has to offer, what direction, meaning and hope it offers. Nothing can stop an idea that has reached its time. The history of the Church shows that the lowest times produced the greatest saints and reformers. The Holy Spirit will inspire people.

### **Spirit-filled evangelisers**

Pope Francis calls for Spirit-filled evangelisers. “Jesus wants evangelisers who proclaim the good news with words, but above all by a life transformed by God’s presence ... How I long to find the right words to stir up enthusiasm for a new chapter of evangelisation full of fervour, joy, generosity, courage, boundless love and attraction!”

Dare to dream! Go forward in hope! “You are the light of the word”, said Jesus, “let your light shine before people so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven” (Matt 5:16). If everyone lit just one little candle what a bright world it would be. At Pentecost a wind shook the house and tongues of fire transformed the Apostles. It’s the wind that causes a tiny spark to develop into a forest fire. In God’s time the Spirit of love will once again set the world on fire.

### **Prayer**

Send forth your Spirit, O Lord, and renew the face of the earth.  
Enkindle within us the fire of your love.