

This feast today marks the end to the Christmas season and Monday morning, we return to “ordinary time”

It might seem a bit odd to us that we jump so rapidly from Jesus’ birth, the visit of the Magi to the beginning of his adult ministry, which in Matthew’s Gospel begins with His baptism in the Jordan River.

It might help to look at them as one long event, changing in intimacy more than over time. The birth of Our Lord was a more private affair. The Holy Family and some animals. Jesus enters the world He came to redeem through an ordinary way in extraordinary poverty. A few shepherds show up, and the event becomes an awakening that something great has happened among the ordinary.

Last week we heard of the Magi who arrive and by their presence announce to us that Jesus came for all of the world, and this event is much less private. Today is also an Epiphany in that it is an awakening, a revelation that what Jesus came to do, He would do openly among the people for all to see.

By the sinless God-man submitting to this ritual of public repentance, the act of Baptism takes on a new importance.

The descent of the Holy Spirit that hovered over the waters while the Father spoke the words of creation in Genesis now rests over Jesus and the Father announces... publicly... the arrival of the promised one for all of creation and the fullness of the Holy Trinity is made known to us.

Jesus is not sanctified or made holy by his entering the waters of the Jordan....rather the waters of the Jordan and indeed... all of creation now become sanctified through Him.

And because Jesus entered those waters, people, ordinary people, are radically changed through the waters of Baptism.

We become extra-ordinary. We are sanctified, that is, set apart for holiness. And the world that we were in before the Sacrament should change because we have changed.

But, in practical terms, this change in the world, happens only in-as-much as we understand our call to holiness and take it seriously and act upon it by the graces given through it.

Flannery O'Conner was an American author, primarily of short stories of fiction that takes place in the deep South in the 1950's. Her gritty style of writing, was not afraid to touch the world as it is with its warts in place.

But it also showed an understanding of the presence of God in the world. We also see a touch of humanity's place and purpose...both because of and within this presence of God.

The main character in her story entitled "The River" is Bevel, a young boy who lives in an apartment with his alcoholic and abusive parents. He is often left with a woman, a sitter, named Mrs. Connin, a woman who lives out her faith as best she can. In the bit of the story I am going to read, Mrs Connin takes Bevel to be baptized.

"Have you ever been baptized?" the preacher asked. "What's that?" Bevel murmured.

"If I baptize you," the preacher said, "you'll be able to go to the kingdom of Christ. You'll be washed in the river of suffering, son. You'll go by the deep river of life. Do you want that?"

"Yes," the child said, and thought, "I won't have to go back to the apartment then. I'll go on to the river."

"You won't be the same again," the preacher said. "You'll count. . . ." And without more warning he tightened his hold and swung him upside down,

and plunged his head into the water. He held him under while he said the words of baptism.

Then he jerked him up again and looked sternly at the gasping child. Bevel's eyes were dark and dilated. "You count now," the preacher said. The little boy was too shocked to cry. He spit out the muddy water and rubbed his wet sleeve into his eyes and over his face.

"Don't forget his mama," Mrs. Connin called. "She's sick."

"Lord," said the preacher, "we pray for somebody in affliction who isn't here to testify." "Is your mother sick in the hospital?" he asked. "Is she in pain?"

The child stared at him. "She hasn't got up yet," he said, in a high dazed voice. "She has a hangover."

The air was so quiet he could hear the broken pieces of the sun knocking on the water.

My friends, Christ's Church, his mystical body ...is full of little children and babysitters, holiness preachers and hung-over parents.

It is both a place and a process where sinners become saints and one by one, the world is made a better place.

Jesus arrives at the river, seeking baptism. John hesitates, but Jesus insists....

and into..... and under the muddy Jordan he goes..... taking all God's people with him.

When He comes out of the water, He Hears the Voice of His Father proclaiming Him as the Father's Beloved Son

Through the waters of Baptism, we too become beloved sons and

daughters of the Father. We receive that same Holy Spirit, and become a new creation not just by Christ, not just along side of Christ but IN Christ.

Christian baptism began at the river but it never ends. It finds its fulfillment in the resurrection....

But it is in that time and space that lies between the beginning and the fulfillment where we “count”.....

that is to say more accurately, that we are accountable to God and to the Church and certainly, to ourselves. We are accountable to the poor, the hungry, the imprisoned, and all the Bevels and Mrs.Connins in our world.

We are accountable to and for justice.

We have this feast today because sometimes we need to return to the river.

Not to another Baptism, for as we say in the Creed we believe in ONE baptism for the forgiveness of sins. But we return to the river, to the waters of our own baptism as a reminder, as a part of both our past and our present so that we might have hope for the future.

We go back there, to rediscover the implications and complications of God's grace.

And it is there that we return to the strength that has been there for us for over 2000 years: faith in Jesus Christ and baptism into his body, the church.