

Homily 2021.01.10 Baptism of the Lord (B)

When I'm preparing a couple for their child's baptism, I sometimes throw out the question, "Tell me about water". And they may look blankly back at me thinking I'm slightly nuts.

So I enlarge the question, "Tell me about water: what does it mean, what does it symbolise, and symbolise in all cultures?" And then hopefully we're off. Interestingly, it's often the non-catholic spouse who is the freer thinker and better able to roll with this more open ended approach.

And so the answers come forth. Water is...
...life, health, purity, cleansing, flowing, life-giving, and so on.

With a little pushing we may also get that water is...
...birth, the breaking of waters.

And also that water is...
...power

But it's rare that I get this final answer unprompted: water is...
...death

Water is essential for life, yet too much of it, either outside of us, or inside our chest cavities will kill us. Water is a life and death matter for us. And the waters of baptism are a life, death, and resurrection matter for us.

As the baptised people of God our lives are stamped by this mystery. We have already faced death and transcended it in the waters of baptism. This is the Good News of Baptism and the source of our profound, serious joy even in the midst of the fear that surrounds us.

Anyone who has not contemplated their mortality in these COVID days has not been paying attention. The waters of baptism mean that we can square up to our mortality face to face, not with a naïve absence of fear, but with the knowledge that we have met this enemy before. And that in Jesus Christ, the one who today sanctifies the very waters of baptism by the immersion of his own body, this enemy has already been overthrown.

In the Rite of Infant Baptism, near the start I ask the parents, "What do you ask of God's church for your child?" And they answer "Baptism". But in older versions of the Rite, which spoke in less certain times, in response to the question, "What do you ask of God's church for your child?" the parents answered "ETERNAL LIFE".

We need that full, dramatic, ultimate sense of our individual and shared baptism to carry us through these uncertain days.