

Baptism of the Lord

Do you remember the date of your baptism? We all remember our birthday but most of us unless we were baptized as an adult don't remember the date of our baptism. This is sad, since baptism is our second birth. For most of us our first birth made us a member of our biological family. Our second birth made us a member of God's family. As a result, God is our father and all the baptized are our brothers and sisters.

Just as Jesus was baptized in water so were all of us. This church was built around the theme of water. The outside etched doors depict the waters of the Red Sea which separated opening a pathway for the Hebrew people to pass through to freedom but collapsing on Pharaoh's pursuing army, killing them all.

The etched doors that greet us when we enter church depict water flowing from the temple in Jerusalem bringing life to the surrounding countryside. The blessing stone in the center of the gathering space depicts the rock in the desert from which water flowed after it was struck by the staff of Moses. From the blessing stone blue water-like tiles lead us first to the infant baptismal font where water is poured over the heads of infants to cleanse them from their sins and then lead us to the adult immersion font that is built into the ground like a watery grave that neophytes walk into where they die to sin and walk out of to be clothed in a white garment as sign of their new life in Christ.

I would like today to talk about baptism in terms of mercy since it is a theme found in each of the scripture readings. The biblical understanding of mercy is expressed in terms of God's love for us. God's love for us is not only the love a Creator for what has been created but is essentially the love of a father and mother for their children.

We see this form of mercy expressed in the first reading from the Prophet Isaiah. God's Chosen People, the Israelites, had sinned grievously against him resulting in the exile of their elite members to Babylon for 50 years. God didn't forget them during those years, however, but comforts them and extends his mercy to them by calling and leading them back home. Their infidelity to Him has been compensated.

An example of God's mercy is also found in the second reading from St. Paul's letter to Titus. Paul uses baptismal images here like cleansing, birth and new life to describe God's work among the members of Titus's Christian community who are having difficulty getting along with one another. As a result, their relationship with God is made right because of God's mercy which is a gift from God and not something that they deserve.

In the gospel reading we hear St. Luke's version of Jesus' baptism. We are told that after he was baptized the Holy Spirit descended upon him empowering him with God the Father's grace, mercy and love. The same mercy that God had shown his people when they were exiled in Babylon.

The scripture readings today make it clear that God's mercy, God's love is extended to us even when we are sinners, even when we don't get along with one another. Baptism is a vivid expression of God's mercy and love in that it removes all sin replacing it with the gift of the Holy Spirit.

The challenge for us is to model God's mercy, that is, to reach out to those who have sinned against us. Are we willing to meet that challenge?