



Homily Notes

Jan 10, 2016: Baptism of the Lord

I: Is 40: 1-5. 9-11 II: Ti 2: 11-14; 3: 4-7 III: Lk 3: 15-16. 21-22

Renewing Our Baptismal Commitment

In Nigeria the baptism of a child is usually followed by a happy reception where children are sure to eat one thing, rice. As a result, the baptism dress is sometimes referred to as your rice dress. Thinking of baptism easily makes people think of rice. And sometimes when you are talking of the rites of baptism, all they hear is the rice of baptism. Though the connection between baptism and rice is altogether accidental, one can utilise it as a memory aid for the meaning of baptism.

What does baptism mean? The meaning of baptism can be found in the four letters of the word **RICE**. “R” stands for **Rebirth**. In baptism we are born again by water and the Holy Spirit. We are cleansed from original sin and become sons and daughters of God in a special way. “I” stands for **Initiation**. At baptism we are initiated or admitted into full membership in the church, the community of the children of God in the world. “C” is for **Consecration**. In baptism we consecrate and dedicate ourselves to seek and to spread the kingdom of God. We commit ourselves to be servants of God, to do God’s will and serve God with our whole lives. And “E” is for **Empowerment**. At baptism the Holy Spirit comes into our lives and empowers us, equips us, gives us the moral strength to say no to evil and to live as God’s children that we have become.

These four effects of baptism can be divided into two categories, the passive effects (what we receive from God and the people of God), namely, rebirth, initiation, and empowerment; and the active effect (what we give to God and the people of God), namely, our commitment and dedication to a cause, to spread the kingdom of God. One problem people have with today's gospel is to understand why Jesus needed to be baptized. An understanding of the "rice" of baptism as we have tried to explain can help.

Looking at the baptism of Jesus by John in the Jordan, we find that Jesus did not need a **rebirth** since he was from all eternity the only begotten child of God. He had no original sin to be cleansed from. Did Jesus need **initiation**? Yes. Being human, Jesus needed to associate and to identify with the community of men and women who were dedicated to promoting the cause of the kingdom of God. When it comes to serving God, no one is an island. We need to interact with other children of God. We need the community of faith just as Jesus did. We need the church. What about **empowerment**? The Holy Spirit, the power of the Most High, who descended on Jesus at his baptism strengthened and empowered him. It was at his baptism that "**God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and with power; [and] he went about doing good and healing all who were oppressed by the devil**" (Acts 10:37-38). And **consecration**? Baptism for Jesus was a moment of self-consecration, a moment of self-dedication. For him it was a commitment to do whatever was necessary to promote the cause of the kingdom of God on earth.

We read that soon after Jesus' baptism, John was arrested and the Kingdom of God movement needed a new leadership. When Jesus heard it he went up and took on the task, in this way implementing the commitment he made at his baptism to promote the kingdom of God. We can see that for Jesus baptism was not just a question of what he could receive but very much a question of what he could contribute to the cause of the kingdom of God on earth. John F. Kennedy's saying, "Ask not what your country can do for you, rather ask what you can do for your country" can also be applied to our relationship with God and the Church.

What are we doing, each one of us, to promote the kingdom of God? Are we ready to consecrate and dedicate ourselves wholly to the service of the kingdom of God just as Jesus did? If not, what are we doing to support those who have consecrated themselves to doing this work in the name of us all? Let us today with Jesus renew our baptismal commitment to bear witness to the Good News of the kingdom of God in word and in deed. - **Munachi E. Ezeogu, cssp** (Internet)

January 17, 2016: II Sunday in Ordinary Time

I: Isaiah 62:1-5; II: I Corinthians 12:4-11; III: John 2:1-11

This Sunday we begin the liturgical season of Ordinary Time. This Sunday is often called “Cana Sunday”. In today's gospel, we hear of the marriage feast at Cana. Mary, the mother of Jesus was invited, as well as Jesus himself and his disciples. As the wedding feast went on, the wine ran out. Mary went out of her way to intercede with Jesus and Jesus performed what John tells us was his very first miracle.

A more fascinating question arising from today's Gospel is: did Mary know all those thirty years she lived with Jesus that she was living with a wonder-worker and yet never she ask him to multiply her bread, turn the water on the dining table into wine, to meet her everyday needs? How come she never asked Jesus to use his miraculous power to help her out but she was quick to ask him to use it and help others?

In the case of Jesus, he knew that he has this power to perform miracles. After his forty days fast in the desert, he was hungry and the devil suggested him to turn some stones into bread and eat, but he did not do it. Yet he went out and multiplied bread for crowds of his followers. What are they telling us, Mary and Jesus, through their actions? God tells us that His gifts to individuals are not meant primarily for our benefits but for the service of others in the community.

In the second reading, St Paul enumerates the many different gifts of the Holy Spirit to different persons and adds that “to each person is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good,” (1 Corinthians 12:6) not for personal profit. Thus Jesus and Mary use their gifts that are for the service for others not for him/herself.

God calls each one of us to use the gifts in service to others for the building up of the Church. When we try to serve others and give away our gifts, the Lord will lavish on us even more abundantly. Then, today

is a good day to ask ourselves: What are the gifts has God given to me? How do I use them: Do I use them for my own glorification or building up God's community? Let us pray to know our gifts and to use them in joy for others. Pray for the grace to be attentive to the inspirations of the Holy Spirit. If we seek to serve, we shall be amazed at our joy!-
Gnanam J.

January 24: 2016: III Sunday in Ordinary Time

I: Neh 8: 2-4a. 5-6. 8-10 II: 1 Cor 12: 12-30 III: Lk 1: 1-4; 4: 14-21

Longing for Total Salvation

One day in an introductory Bible class one of the participants asked: "Why are there four Gospels rather than one?" Certainly things would look a lot easier if there was only one Gospel. Everything we read in that one Gospel would then be the gospel truth, pure and simple. Now that we have four Gospels that often differ significantly from one another, things can be quite confusing. When you come to think of it, however, you begin to realise that things would be a lot worse if we had only one Gospel. If we had only one Gospel we would think that there is only one way of understanding Jesus and how he relates to us. But now that we have four different Gospels, each of them telling a significantly different story of Jesus and his mission, it becomes easier for us to see that no story of Jesus can exhaust the whole truth of what Jesus is. As limited human beings we can only tell part of the story of God.

This remind us of the story of the six blind men who set out to discover what the elephant is. The first blind man feels the elephant's side and says the elephant is like a wall. The second blind man feels the elephant's tusk and says it is like a spear. The third feels the trunk and says it is like a snake. The fourth feels the elephant's knee and says the elephant is like a tree. The fifth feels the ear and says it is like a fan. And the sixth blind man feels the elephant's tail and concludes that the elephant is like a rope. You could imagine the bitter disagreement that would ensue among them if they got together to discuss the nature of the elephant. Every one of them would insist that he is right and the others wrong. But the truth of the matter is: yes, he is right, but then so also are all the others. Each

of them has a valid experience of the elephant but no one of them possesses the full knowledge of the total reality of the elephant. Even when you put all the six images of the elephant together it still does not capture the full mosaic of the elephant.

After Vatican II the church's reading of the Gospels on Sunday was revised into a three-year cycle: year A for the gospel of Matthew, year B for Mark, and year C for Luke. The gospel of John is read on certain Sundays interspersed within the three years, such as the Sundays of the Easter season. We are now in year C, the year of Luke. The question we shall be asking ourselves this year is, What aspect of the mystery of Christ does Luke highlight, as distinct from the focus of the other Gospels? A certain scholar has outlined in one word the aspect of Christ that each of the Gospels highlights. Matthew highlights the Christ of **majesty** (who heals by word of mouth alone, never touches people, never hungry, never angry, etc.), Mark highlights the Christ of **might** (who proves he is the Messiah by his acts of power and authority over natural and demonic forces), Luke highlights the Christ of **mercy** (who reaches out to the poor, the outcasts, foreigners and women) and John highlights the Christ of **mystery** (who was with the Father from all eternity and who has come into the world to reveal this hidden mystery, the truth that leads to life).

Today we begin reading the Gospel of Luke. In his opening preface (1:1-4) Luke tells us why he wrote the gospel. It was to explain to Theophilus, probably a Roman official, what Christianity was all about. Have you ever tried to explain to someone what Christianity is all about? Many people think that Christianity is all about sin and judgment, heaven and hell; and that God is a heavenly policeman who is constantly monitoring our movements, writing down all our sins in His book and waiting to throw us into hellfire as soon as He catches up with us. Luke sees it all differently. For him Christianity has more to do with God's love and mercy than with punishment.

That is why, in telling Theophilus about the Christian faith, Luke finds the incident in the synagogue in Nazareth very useful. In this incident found only in Luke's Gospel, Jesus makes a solemn declaration of his mission in the world. We can call it the Jesus Manifesto. People who initiate a revolution usually start off with a declaration of their manifesto. Karl Mark started by publishing the Communist Manifesto.

Martin Luther started off with the publication of the 95 theses in Wittenberg. Jesus has come to start a revolution of mercy and love in the world. And here in today's Gospel reading he publishes the Christian manifesto:

The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour. (4:18-19)

In these few words we see in a nutshell how Jesus, in Luke, understands his mission in the world. What is Jesus' work? It is **"to bring good news to the poor, to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour."** In Matthew Jesus speaks of **"the poor in spirit"** but in Luke he speaks simply of **"the poor."** Jesus in Luke is concerned not only with the spiritual aspects of human life but also with the material and social aspects. Here we see the love and mercy of Jesus reaching out to all in need. Like the master, so the followers. We who bear the name of Christ -- Christians -- ought to live according to Christ's manifesto. It is our mission as individuals and as a community to bring Good News to the poor in our society. Today's gospel challenges us to stretch out our hands in practical solidarity with those who are visibly disadvantaged around us. Before we save people's souls that we cannot see, we must first endeavour to save their bodies, their health, their housing and their jobs that we can see. - **Munachi E. Ezeogu, cssp** (Internet)

January 31, 2016: IV Sunday in Ordinary Time

I: Jer 1: 4-5. 17-19 II: 1 Cor 12: 31 – 13: 13 III: Lk 4: 21-30

Seeing the Good in Our Neighbour

Mercury is an element which is not soluble in any other element other than gold. Love is not like this, though many see it as a separate entity or virtue. No virtue in that case can be seen in itself without any relation to any other virtue. This is emphasized in today's readings. Love is greater than any virtue. Love is like the thread that connects all the beads of the

virtues. St. Paul tells the community that perceives the gifts of the Holy Spirit as a great gift that, love is much more than any of these charisms. Gift is given by anyone as a sign of love. Very often we find ourselves valuing gifts more than the love behind the gift. Thus, no charism however great it may be, is to be valued than love. Love is greater than hope and faith. How can this be? During Jesus's earthly life, his disciples loved him, had hope in him that he would liberate them from foreign rule and had faith that He is the Messiah. Once, Jesus was arrested, we see that their hope and faith on Jesus had fallen apart which made them to abandon him in the most crucial moment. But their love for him had not dried up. This can be clearly perceived when we see the character of Peter who was following Jesus at a distance. But Judas had lost even his love on Christ the result of which caused him to take his life. In the Gospel of today, we see that the people were amazed at the *Gracious* words that came from his mouth. Unless one has love overflowing, one cannot be gracious. The reaction of the people teaches us that we must not take for granted, the persons who are familiar to us, much less, judge them. To what extent are we able to see the good in a person whom daily encounter? - **Bhanu Yeswanth**

February 7, 2016: V Sunday in Ordinary Time
I: Is 6:1-2a, 3-8; II: 1 Cor 15:1-11; III: Lk 5:1-11

Called to Proclaim

The readings of today reminds us of our Christian calling to proclaim the good news of salvation. This call is not veiled by any discriminating factor. Everyone is called to be heralds and proclaimers of the good news of salvation! The second reading of today reminds us of the privilege that we have received, the word of God, the good news of salvation. This is not to be kept hidden. Paul, a person who was mercilessly slaying the followers of Christ himself became a great icon of all discipleship and the greatest missionary of all times with the first encounter on the road to Damascus.

The thirst for the word of God is found everywhere. The very fact that there are tensions and turmoil that happen around us are signs of the absence of the word of God. We are called to sow the word in such places so that the kingdom of God may be made manifests. The Gospel brings to us the beautiful encounter between Jesus and Peter. Peter

immediately recognized the power of the word. There was no second thought about following Jesus. He experienced immediate transformation at the first invitation. The same thing happened in the life of Paul.

As Christians, we need to ask ourselves whether the word of God have brought about any change in us and in the lives of the people around us. When we look at the world of today, the movement of the people is taking a reverse turn. The thirst for God is changed to thirst for power, name and fame. Are we victims of it? Are we contributing our shares in the establishment of the kingdom of God? **Vekupa Rhakho George**

February 14, 2016: I Sunday of Lent
I: Dt 26: 4-10 II: Rom 10: 8-13 III: Lk 4: 1-13
The Precious Faithfulness

In the heat of the President Bill Clinton and Miss Monica Lewinsky affair the head of a women's support group spoke on CNN. This is what she said, in essence: "Monica Lewinsky has done nothing wrong. In the world of corporate establishments and in the White House bureaucracy, women who want to advance must use everything at their disposal: power, connections and sex. If that is what she has done, we see absolutely nothing wrong with that." The name of the game is: use what you have to get what you want. I am sure you have heard that before. Many people indeed take it as their philosophy of life. In our Gospel reading today, however, Jesus shows us that the principle of using whatever you have to get whatever you want is not always right. In fact, when that principle is applied without putting God first, it becomes a philosophy of the world, the devil's own philosophy, a philosophy that should be rejected even as Jesus did.

Our Gospel today is on the Temptation of Jesus in the wilderness. Three temptations are recounted: to change stone into bread, to fall down and worship the devil, and to jump down from the pinnacle of the Temple. In each of these three temptations what the devil is saying to Jesus is, "Come on, use what you have to get what you want." And in each case

Jesus overcomes the temptation by replying, "No, we can only use godly means to satisfy our God-given needs or to pursue our goals in life."

In the first temptation, Jesus had fasted for forty days in the wilderness and at the end of it he was very hungry. The devil puts an idea into his head: **"If you are the Son of God, command this stone to become bread"** (Luke 4:3). Notice that the first thing the devil does is sow a doubt in his mind: **"if you are the Son of God."** "Are you really sure God is with you?" The same thing happened in the garden of Eden. The first thing the Tempter said to Eve was, **"Did God really say you should not eat of any fruit of the garden"** (Genesis 3:1). Temptation always begins with a doubting thought. Did God really say this or is it one of those Sunday school fairy tales? Jesus overcame the temptations by refusing to entertain such doubts and by standing on the word of God.

Note, secondly, that people are tempted only with what they need or want. After his fasting Jesus needed to eat. So the devil tempted him with food. It is not a sin for Jesus to eat after fasting. The sin may lie in how the food is obtained. Should he follow the normal way of obtaining bread or should he take the shortcut suggested by the devil to obtain instant bread? Jesus refuses to take the devil's shortcut. The means we employ to satisfy our needs must be in accordance with the word of God. Feeding on God's word is ultimately more important than feeding on bread. **"It is written, 'One does not live by bread alone'"** (v. 4).

In the second temptation the devil shows Jesus all the kingdoms of the world and promises to give him authority over them if only Jesus would worship him. Remember that Jesus was about to begin his public life and was looking for a way to get the whole world to know him and accept his message. Again the devil tempts him to use what he has (his heart, his soul) to get what he wants (the loyalty of the whole world). Again Jesus says no. The end does not justify the means. **"It is written, 'Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him'"** (v. 8).

In the third temptation the devil asks Jesus to throw himself down from the pinnacle of the temple as a way to prove that he was the Son of God. Remember that the people were asking Jesus for a sign to prove that he was the Messiah. Jesus wanted to convince them that he was the one. But how do you do it! The devil suggested this sensational sky jump without a parachute. Again, use what you have to get what you want. Use your

supernatural power to get the people to recognize you and believe in you as the Son of God, the Messiah. And again Jesus says no. The God of Jesus Christ is not a God of the sensational but a God who works through the ordinary, everyday things of life. **"Do not put the Lord your God to the test"** (v. 12).

So you see, unlike those friends of Monica who believe you can trade off everything you have to obtain what you want, Jesus shows us that we should never trade off our faith in God or our moral principles to obtain anything in this world, because faithfulness to God is more precious than anything in this world. - **Munachi E. Ezeogu, cssp** (Internet)

February 21, 2016: II Sunday of Lent

I: Gen 15:5-12,17-18; II: Philip 3;17-4:1; III: Luke 9:28b-36.

The One Love that does not Change

I once heard an angry man expressing his desire for revenge in this 'religious' way: "If God is just, you are going to suffer for this!" Just as God is understood to be superior to us in love and mercy, so too, His justice is thought of as the most implacable.

That is not the God revealed in the Bible. The Holy Scriptures repeatedly reveal the face of a God who comes to meet us out of tender compassion. The Lord is no distant ruler, but a covenant God. What does that mean?

In this first reading we read of the covenant (or agreement) that God makes with Abraham and his future descendants. This covenant is different from human contracts on two scores: 1. The initiative is all God's. 2. Even when the human partners are unfaithful, God is faithful. God cannot be untrue to His own kindness; in fact, the word 'justice' in the Bible refers not to any vengeful settling of accounts but to this comforting truth: God's loving kindness cannot change.

No wonder St. Teresa of Lisieux would say, "The reason for my confidence is God's justice. Being just, He is bound to remember that I am weak". This infinitely tender God, for reasons best known to him, comes forward repeatedly to save, to heal, to console. This fidelity will accompany us all through this short earthly journey, and transform us beyond our wildest imaginings after our death. When Paul reassures his

Christians and asks them to remain faithful (today's second reading), He is not talking of holding on to a theory or a legal system. He speaks of responding to an ever present love.

This love became visible and tangible in Jesus of Nazareth. Its true nature remained hidden from human view most of the time, but on occasions its inexpressible divine form burst through the veil of Jesus' humanity. At the transfiguration, the apostles are dazzled by the glimpse of Christ's deeper reality: "This is my Son, the Chosen One. Listen to Him".

Jesus is the best and the most definite demonstration of love by the covenant God who never goes back on his fidelity. Whatever the treachery from the human side, God remains faithful to us, because He cannot be untrue to his own nature. We are grounded unshakably on love, not because of what we have done, or not done, but because God is God. For our good fortune, there is one love that will never change and in which there is no fear of rejection. **-Vikas Jason Mathias**

Feb 28, 2016: III Sunday of Lent

I: Ex 3; 1-8a, 13-15; II: 1 Cor 10:1-6, 10-12; III: Lk 13:1-9

Called to Be Faithful

Christian vocation is nothing but a call to be faithful. The readings of today are reminders for us to be faithful. God abhors the lukewarm attitude. We have very classic example of this kind of people in the Exodus story. The people of Israel in spite of God's intervention into their misery kept on doubting and complaining. They kept questioning God for the little inconveniences. As a result, some of them could not reach the Promised Land.

We as Christians who are specially called, are reminded not to repeat the errors of the people in the wilderness. God who created us knows what is best. God does not make any mistake. Everything that happens is for our good. The inconveniences and the hardships we encounter in our day-to-day lives are part of the divine plan. We need to cooperate because life is not a bed of roses. There are thorns and thistles in the journey of life. Blessed are those who see the silver linings beyond the clouds of adversity. The Gospel of today is rather quite harsh and leaves no room for third option. Instead it is quite blunt; repent or perish!

We need to rise up from the heap of our sins and turn to the Lord who calls us, waits for us patiently and eagerly for our return. The baptismal promises that we made, the creed that we profess will make sense only if we are faithful, otherwise, we will be condemned like the scribes and Pharisees of Jesus' time. -**Vekupa Rhakho George**

March 6, 2015: IV Sunday of Lent

I: Jos 5: 9a. 10-12 II: 2 Cor 5: 17-21 III: Lk 15: 1-3.11-32

The Father's Way

What is the difference between a crisp \$20 bill and a soiled and rumpled \$20 bill? A preacher showed his congregation a crisp \$20 bill and asked who wants it. All hands went up. Then he crumpled it in his palms and asked who still wanted it. Again all hands went up. Lastly he threw it on the ground, marched on it and repeated his question. Still the hands went up. Then he explained to them that the difference between a new, crisp \$20 bill and a rumpled and soiled \$20 in our eyes is the difference between a good person and a bad person in the sight of God. Both are equally acceptable. Basically both stand equal before God "**since all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God**" (Romans 3:23). Henri Nouwen says it differently: "We are all handicapped; some are more visibly handicapped than others."

Today's gospel is the family story of a man and his two sons. At the beginning of the story we see that the younger son is the bad boy and the elder son the good boy. But by the end of the story we see that both of them in different ways prove themselves to be obstacles to the family unity and harmony which the father desired more than anything.

The problem begins with the younger son. Without waiting for his father to die he asks for his share of the inheritance. Then he abandons his duties and responsibilities in the family estate and goes abroad to live a life of fun. His reckless lifestyle drains his fortunes and he finds himself reduced to abject poverty and misery. That a Jewish prince like him should condescend to feeding pigs, which Jews regard as unclean animals, shows the depths of degradation in which he finds himself. A life of sins quickly enough leads people to a situation where they lose all

sense of shame and decency. But no matter how far sinners stray from the father's house, the loving heart of the father always follows them, gently whispering in their hearts, "Come home! Come home!" Our wild, fun-loving sinful younger man has one thing going for him: he is not too proud to go back and say, "I have erred; I am sorry." And this is precisely what he decides to do.

How his heart would be pounding as he approaches his father's house, not knowing whether his father would take him back or not! **"But while he was still far off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion; he ran and put his arms around him and kissed him"** (Luke 15:20). The young man begins to read his prepared confession but his father is so overjoyed he does not listen.

But the father said to his slaves, "Quickly, bring out a robe -- the best one -- and put it on him; put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. And get the fatted calf and kill it, and let us eat and celebrate; for this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found!" And they began to celebrate (v 22-24).

At this point the story shows us the flaws of the good elder brother. Instead of rejoicing that his brother who was presumed lost has come back, he is angered by the fact that their father has received him back with a celebration. In anger he distances himself from his own family and from the party. As he leaves he mutters to himself, "This is unfair. This is unfair" -- a word that is often used to justify anger, intolerance, self-righteousness and violence. In so doing the "good" elder brother brings disunity to the father's house and sorrow to himself. The sins of those who are not good enough (younger brother) as well as the sins of those who are too good (elder brother) are equally obstacles in the realisation of unity and harmony in the father's house.

We are all sinners. Whether your sins are more visible like those of the younger son or more hidden like those of the elder son, the message for us today is that we all need to repent and return to the father's house. The younger son needs to turn back from his frivolous lifestyle and return to the father's house and be a responsible and obedient son. The elder son needs to turn back from anger and resentment and learn to share the house with the apparently undeserving younger brother.

After teaching her Sunday school kids about the Parable of the Prodigal Son, a teacher asked them: "Now tell me: Who suffered the most in the story?" A child raised her hand and answered, "the fatted cow." Absolutely! Next to the fatted calf comes the elder son who remained outside while the party went on inside. He did not even taste the fatted calf that he had helped to raise. All because he stuck to his own ideas of fairness and justice and failed to see that the father's ways are not our ways. Thank God! - **Munachi E. Ezeogu, cssp** (Internet)

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- "But, careful! Jesus does not say, Go off and do things on your own. No! That is not what he is saying. Jesus says, Go, for I am with you! This is what is so beautiful for us; it is what guides us. If we go out to bring his Gospel with love, with a true apostolic spirit, with parrhesia, he walks with us, he goes ahead of us, and he gets there first. As we say in Spanish, *nos primerea*. By now you know what I mean by this. It is the same thing that the Bible tells us. In the Bible, the Lord says: I am like the flower of the almond. Why? Because that is the first flower to blossom in the spring. He is always the first! This is fundamental for us: God is always ahead of us! When we think about going far away, to an extreme outskirts, we may be a bit afraid, but in fact God is already there. Jesus is waiting for us in the hearts of our brothers and sisters, in their wounded bodies, in their hardships, in their lack of faith." — Pope Francis, *The Church of Mercy*