

Baptism of the Lord “Baptisms and Funerals”

Bishop Frank Schuster

Again, it is an honor to be here with you this evening. This has been an emotional week as we give thanks for the gift of Fr. Jim Lee and the blessing he was for this community. Grieving the loss of anyone close to us is difficult any time of the year, but especially during the Christmas season. However, when it comes right down to it, celebrating Christmas makes absolutely no sense without our Easter hope. We do not celebrate Jesus’ birthday because he was a great leader, philosopher, or even because he was a healer. We celebrate Jesus’ birthday because he is our savior.

This weekend we wrap up the Christmas Season with the celebration of the Baptism of the Lord. This feast day shows us Jesus being immersed into our human condition. The creator is baptized by his creation, not for his benefit, but for ours. This is why the Baptism of the Lord is a fitting conclusion to the Christmas season, because Jesus’ baptism by John the Baptist is an incarnational statement. No matter who we are, where we have been, no matter what we have done or what we are going through, Jesus is truly Emmanuel, a word that means “God is with us”. Jesus’ namesake is a word that literally means “God saves.” God saves us by immersing himself in the human condition and entered even death itself for the forgiveness of our sins. Again, celebrating Christmas makes no sense without our Easter hope.

And so, in this sense, given what we have experienced this past week, it is fitting that we reflect a little bit on the celebration of Christian funeral and how this relates to the Christmas season. And yes, I say “celebrate” on purpose, because even though we grieve, we don’t do so without hope. Just like celebrating Christmas makes no sense without our easter hope, the celebration of Christian funerals makes no sense without the sacrament of baptism. Recall St. Paul telling us in Romans to remember that we who are baptized into Christ Jesus are also baptized into his death, so that if we die with Christ we will also rise with him on the last day. That’s our faith, and that faith offers hope.

Let’s connect the dots a little. On the day of our baptism, we were baptized by water and the Holy Spirit. During the celebration of Christian funerals, the first thing we do at the beginning of the liturgy is sprinkle the casket with Holy Water. On the day of our baptism, we were given a white garment. At a funeral celebration, a large white cloth called a pall is placed on the casket, reminding us of this baptismal garment. On the day of our baptism, we were given a baptismal candle, lit from the paschal candle. At funeral celebrations, the paschal candle is lit reminding us of our baptismal candle. We are given the choice of white, purple or black for the liturgical color of a funeral celebration. It is understandable at times to wear a purple or black vestment, depending on the circumstance. Whenever possible, white is the preferred color for most celebrants, including this one, because that is the liturgical color of the celebration of Easter and therefore baptism. It is the color of the robes of the messengers at Jesus’ tomb after the

resurrection. Their message to us was, why look for the living one among the dead. He is not here. He has risen! Alleluia!

As an aside, when I am at a grave side, I sometimes make a comment that another word for burying a body into the earth could be the word “gardening”. Like Jesus tells us, unless a grain of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains a grain of wheat, but if it dies, it will yield a great harvest. And so, this is what we do when we bury someone into the ground. Because we believe in the resurrection of the body, we believe we are planting a seed that will bear fruit into everlasting life. That is our goal. That is where we want to be.

Take birthdays for example. Celebrating birthdays is a wonderful thing to do, however, have we considered how wonderful it would be if we celebrated the anniversary of our baptism? Our first birth is a celebration first and foremost about beginnings and in thanksgiving of the gift of life while we still have it. In the sacrament of baptism, however, the future of eternal death is wiped away. When Jesus submerged himself into our reality on the day of his baptism, he offers us sanctification in the exchange if we allow ourselves to be baptized into his death and so rise on the last day. Given that perspective, can any of us imagine a more important day than the day of our baptism? Something to think about!

Indeed, all the sacraments of the Church begin with the sacrament of baptism. And every one of us, by our baptism, are called to sanctify the world through the vocation God has called us to. Have you considered that this is why the celebration of Fr. Jim Lee’s life was as great as it was. Fr. Jim Lee was a man who lived the grace of his baptism well and called us all to do the same. The greatest homily he ever gave did not have words. The greatest homily he ever gave was his example. Yes, in that same way, if we live the sacrament of baptism ourselves, and I mean really live our baptismal calling, this consciousness has implications on how we live. It has implications on how we treat the other people in our lives, our family members and friends, our neighbors and co-workers, the immigrant and the unborn, and even the people in our lives who in November voted differently than we did. Them too. This baptismal consciousness also has implications on how we treat the person we see in the mirror each morning. God loves what he sees. Why don’t you?

A baptismal consciousness invites us to order our lives anew around the priorities of the Kingdom of God than rather than the priorities of the world. This is because a baptismal consciousness also reminds us that our days here are numbered. As a baptized people, there will be a day for all of us when the people we love will gather for our funeral liturgy. On that day, will our lives have pointed to Jesus, to the Gospel, or would our lives have pointed to lesser treasure? I think this question is central to the feast day we celebrate today of the Baptism of the Lord. And so, in that spirit, after this homily, we will renew the vows of our own baptism, reject sin, and embrace the Gospel. By doing so, we celebrate our hope that the day of our funeral won’t be a celebration of an ending, but rather a new beginning.