

Welcome in love, farewelled in love

One of the things I love about the month of January - apart from all the obvious festivities of the summer holidays, the Christmas season and the new year - is the feast of the Baptism of the Lord. In the Gospel story, Matthew, Mark and Luke encapsulate the power of the moment: as Jesus emerges from the waters of the Jordan, the heavens are torn apart, the Spirit descends and a voice speaks from heaven. Dramatic stuff! Yet at the heart of it is a message of supreme tenderness, intimacy: 'You are my Son, the Beloved; my favour rests on you.' In a graced outpouring of the Father's love, Jesus is confirmed in his identity and mission. Likewise, Christian baptism reveals to us who we really are: graced, anointed, God's beloved. This is a great and empowering mystery, which finds ongoing expression every day in the life of our parishes, as one parish priest pointed out to me in the following reflection.

In a Sydney parish...

On Tuesday we celebrated the funeral of a baby girl. She had been baptized just ten days earlier. Born premature, she arrived in this world with serious complications and lived only a short time. In keeping with the funeral rite, the coffin was sprinkled with holy water as a sign of baptism; a symbol of our Christian belief that this is a child of God.

The next day we celebrated the funeral of a ninety year old parishioner. Again the coffin was sprinkled with holy water. Again the significance of baptism was acknowledged by the community of faith.

Two very different people. Generations apart. Both baptised. Both welcomed and farewelled by the Church as daughters of God. It brings home the sacredness of life. We are on this earth for a short time, and whether it be minutes or decades, whether we die in utero or well into old age, our existence has a purpose, a sacred origin and an eternal destiny.

The Church's rite of baptism celebrates this gift of life. And not only the life breathed into us at creation, but the life of salvation, our sharing in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, our gracious life of freedom in the Spirit. In Christ we are welcomed in love, and throughout our lives, dying and rising through painful passages, we are sustained and guided by the faith of the Church, her people, her sacraments. And, finally, we are farewelled in love. This too is part of our baptismal belief. We come full circle. We return to the Father's arms, cradled in the love that has never left us. •

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