

FEAST OF THE BAPTISM OF THE LORD “C”  
JANUARY 12/13, 2019

“The Great Reveal” was a day that my friends and I as children looked forward to every year in mid-September. A friend’s grandfather owned the local Chevrolet dealership in town. Back then early fall was the “great reveal.” Unlike today, the vehicle dealer did not have acres of models to choose from. My friend’s grandfather would order just two cars of the next year’s model to display. A week or two before the “great reveal” (always while we were in school) the new models would arrive shrouded on a transport truck. They were parked in another garage in town (still shrouded) until moved (in the dark of night) to the dealership on the “great reveal” day. After school we’d hurry to the dealership to view next year’s bright, shiny, car that Chevrolet was offering. Besides the delight in the new car, the free cookies may have had something to do with our enthusiasm for the “great reveal”!

This weekend’s celebration of the baptism of Jesus by John is also a “great reveal.” St. Luke tells us in today’s gospel that, just like my friends and me, the people “filled with expectation” (Lk. 3:15). Messianic hopes, like the atmosphere before a summer thunderstorm, were palpable. Some believed John and his preaching and baptism of repentance were the fulfillment of the scriptures promise. John’s ministry was one of prophetic calls to repentance and reform not only for individuals who came to him attracted by his preaching, but also to repentance and reform of the established religious and political authorities (a message that received a cool and even hostile reception, as it still does today). As a person John was a firebrand. (I don’t think I’d have chosen him as a roommate!) No one, no organization or institution was exempt from his fiery rhetoric. He was in the model of the great prophet Elijah, also a firebrand. Yet, John when asked if he is the fulfillment of the messianic hopes, points away from himself to “one mightier than I, whose sandal straps I am unit to loosen, who will baptize with the Holy Spirit and fire” (Lk. 3:15-16). John, too, was waiting for the “Great Reveal.”

In baptizing Jesus, John, removes the “shroud” of the hidden years of Jesus’ life in Nazareth. Jesus’ baptism is the moment of the “great reveal.” But what kind of a messiah is this model?

St. Luke tells us that after his baptism, as he was praying, Jesus experienced the Holy Spirit descending on him and a heavenly voice acclaiming him as “my beloved Son” (Lk. 3:22). More than just a statement of a familial relationship and revelation of the mystery of the Trinity of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, the title “Son” reveals the nature of Jesus’ mission. In the Greek of the scriptures the noun “son” can also be translated “servant.” Jesus is revealed as the “servant Son”. Today’s first reading from Isaiah lists the qualities of God’s servant: “he shall bring forth justice to the nations, not crying out, not shouting, not making his voice heard in the street. A bruised reed he will not break, and a smoldering wick he shall not quench until he establishes justice on the earth” (Isa. 42:1-4). The contrast between the person and ministry of John and Jesus could not be greater. John’s person and ministry, strident and militant, gives way to Jesus, who when necessary would call out the sins and hypocrisy of individuals and institutions represented most often by the Scribes and Pharisees, is a ministry characterized primarily by mercy and compassion especially to those who find themselves or are relegated by the power-brokers of the world to the margins of society: the voiceless, the powerless.

Our celebration of Jesus’ baptism is a call for each of us to reflect upon, and renew, the call and mission of our baptism. This is particularly needed today as our Church faces challenges both externally and internally to its purpose and mission. Today each of us must decide which model of discipleship and church we choose to live. Some today advocate a “church militant” an institution and individuals committed to a selected litmus test of “orthodox” truths, calling out who is in and who is out, the elect few and the many “damned.” Pope Francis’ has consistently proposed the model of Jesus’ ministry, a servant church, holding fast to the truths and traditions received, applying them, in the words of St. Pope John XXIII, with the “medicine of mercy.”

Today, the “Great Reveal” is about choosing our model of discipleship.