

Not too long before my mom died more than twenty years ago now, she and I were reminiscing about Christmases past. She was telling me about how she and my dad always looked forward to putting presents under the tree after me and my brother had gone to bed. Well, most of the time, anyway. She laughed when she recalled the occasions when my dad would take a look at one of the toys and find the dreaded words, “some assembly required.”

My dad was a very thoughtful and wise man, but when it came to anything mechanical — even simple assemblies — these were skills that always eluded him. It’s a trait I inherited, too. Word to the wise: for your own safety, don’t ever ask me to put something together or to fix anything.

One year, my mom remembered, the thing I wanted more than anything in the world was a complete gas station set. It had everything. A service bay complete with lifts, pumps, cars, attendants and mechanics — the works. It came in a box, of course, and when my dad opened it on Christmas Eve, he found the dreaded words on the instructions: “Some assembly required.”

That was the first sign of trouble.

Most of the station was made out of thin metal that needed to be folded and held together with tiny screws, a seemingly simple task. My mom told me, however, that my dad had a devil of a time folding the metal into shape and holding it together while attempting to put in the screws. She said he got so many cuts from handling the metal that she was afraid he’d need an emergency transfusion. Of course, he was a typical guy and refused to ask for or accept any help. But he persevered, and there it was under the tree for me on Christmas morning — minus my dad’s blood stains. I had the best time with it. I can recall it to this very day.

That’s the way it is with some things in life, even important things. Much joy can come from seemingly simple things, and often there’s some assembly required to experience them to their fullest.

The Baptism of the Lord that we celebrate today is a reminder of this. The event it commemorates took place in simple, unremarkable circumstances — like our own baptisms — and, like all baptisms, some assembly is required to allow the full enjoyment of the grace it brings. Baptism is a box under our tree, but we still have to do something with it. We still have to open it and assemble its contents.

Were we in Jerusalem today instead of Decherd, we could hop in a car and head down Highway 1 some twenty miles or so to the east — and I mean “down” quite literally. The ancient road descends some 3,300 feet taking us from the mountains of Jerusalem down through the desert that lies at Jerusalem’s doorstep to the lowest terrain on earth, the Jordan River valley, almost 900 feet below sea level. We could then head north on Highway 90 for about five miles passing Jericho on the way, thought to be the oldest continually inhabited city on earth, and there, about two miles to our right, would be the site where John the Baptist, the greatest of “those born of women” as Jesus described him,¹ once called all of Judea to repentance, and it was there that Jesus was Himself baptized, as Matthew observes in today’s Gospel.²

Given its importance in history, we tend to think of the Jordan as one of the world’s great and mighty rivers, something along the lines of the Nile or the Mississippi. But its importance doesn’t lie in its grandeur. Whereas, for example, at Memphis the Mississippi is a mile wide and the Corps of Engineers maintains it at a typical depth of nine feet (though seasonal rains often increase its depth to 65 feet or more), on average the Jordan River is three feet deep (occasionally rising to ten feet) and is only about thirty yards wide. Not very impressive in and of itself.

From simple things come great ones, sometimes.

And so it is with baptism. Today’s feast can sometimes lead to confusion, though. After all, given that Jesus was without sin, why did He need John’s baptism of repentance? The answer, of course, is that He didn’t. It wasn’t that His baptism changed Jesus; it was that

¹ Mt 11:11 (NAB)

² Mt 3:13 (NAB)

Jesus changed baptism, just as John the Baptist had foretold He would by “baptiz[ing us] with fire and the Holy Spirit”.³ He changed baptism so that it would change us.

He changed it so that henceforth, through our own baptism, we’d become heirs to the grace He extends to us by erasing the taint of original sin we inherited from our forebears Adam and Eve. In doing so, Christ makes of us the “new creation” about which Paul wrote to the church in Corinth, so that in baptism, “the old things have passed away; behold, new things have come.”⁴ That’s the first of the gifts Christ places under our tree, so to speak, but some assembly is still required.

It’s required because baptism isn’t simply a rite or a ritual (though it is these things in part, of course), and it isn’t simply a “one and done” moment as if all it involves is Christ waving at us from a passing car, so to speak. To use Paul’s language, baptism is a moment of “creation” and what’s being created in us, the presence of the Lord’s grace in our life, never ends. Indeed, baptism, this moment of creation, doesn’t end when the baptismal liturgy is over; it never ends, in fact, because God is always creating both in the world at large and in us. As Paul also reminded the church in Corinth, “we are God’s co-worker’s; [we] are God’s field, God’s building,”⁵ and what we’re called in baptism to help build is the kingdom of God.⁶

Some assembly is required, then.

Just as God noted to the prophet Isaiah that He, the Lord, “made you ... formed you from the womb,”⁷— assembled us, we might say — our baptism provides direction in our part in helping to assemble, each in our own way, through our own callings and vocations, the Messianic kingdom of the Gospel.

It does so in the three offices we acquire in baptism.

Each of us is invested with the priesthood of Christ — not the sacramental priesthood that Fr. Anthony enjoys, but the common priesthood of all the disciples of the Lord. The

³ Mt 3:11 (NAB)

⁴ 2 Cor 5:17 (NAB)

⁵ 1 Cor 3:9 (NAB)

⁶ Col 4:11 (NAB)

⁷ Isa 44:2 (NAB)

sacramental and the common priesthoods have at least one thing in common, though. Just as no priest is ordained just to be sent home with a pleasant memory and no responsibility to serve others, the same is true of us. The various gifts that Christ bestows on each of us as part of our formation in the womb, the formation about which the Lord spoke to Isaiah, are given not just — and sometimes not principally — for our own benefit but for the benefit of others. We're to serve others.

Every ordained priest is also a deacon (I remind them of this from time to time; in fact, Pope Francis sometimes washed feet on Holy Thursday wearing only his deacon's stole over his alb), and so while we speak of the common priesthood conferred in baptism, it's just as accurate to refer to the common diaconate. The word "deacon" comes from the Greek word for "servant." To be baptized is to become a servant.

To be baptized is also to become a prophet. Being a prophet doesn't mean standing on a street corner hectoring others — although some of Israel's great prophets did just that. In the New Testament, the Greek word that's often used for "to prophesy" means "to speak under the influence of divine inspiration, with or without reference to future events".⁸ We're not called to be soothsayers; instead, we're called to be inspired by the Gospel in our hearts, minds, and souls, so that, like the Messiah we serve, we spread the Good News by doing our part in assembling, in building, a kingdom that's "a light for the nations," a kingdom of "justice," a kingdom that "gives breath" (gives life) "to its people" by "open[ing] the eyes of the blind ... bring[ing] out prisoners from confinement," and helping to free from the "dungeon[s]" in which others "live" — or have been cast into — "darkness", as we heard the Lord exhort us through the prophet Isaiah in our First Reading.⁹

Being baptized, then, is to enter a common priesthood; it's being called to prophesy, to witness; and it's also being called to share in the kingship of Christ when He returns at an unknowable day and hour to bring to its full fruition the kingdom He inaugurated when He

⁸ For a discussion of "προφητεῖω," see Johannes P. Louw and Eugene A. Nida, *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament Based on Semantic Domains*, Vol 1, 2nd ed., (New York: United Bible Societies, 1989), 33.459

⁹ Isa 42:1-8 (NAB)

walked among us and that we're to continue building even now. Note well, however, that it's *Christ's* kingship to which we're joined, not that of secular powers or principalities. It's *Christ's* kingdom that He'll bring in all its fullness when He returns, for as He famously remarked to Pilate, "My kingdom does not belong to this world."¹⁰ The fullness of the Kingdom He'll bring one day won't be a ratification of the political biases, divisions, and divisions of this or any age. These will be among "the old things" about which Paul wrote that'll "pass away," something that shouldn't surprise us because they're not part of Christ's kingdom today, either.

Matthew tells us that, "After Jesus was baptized, he came up from the water and behold, the heavens were opened (for him), and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and coming upon him."¹¹ When we're baptized today, a priest or deacon touches our ears and our mouth saying, "May the Lord Jesus, who made the deaf to hear and the mute to speak, grant that you may soon receive his word with your ears and profess the faith with your lips, to the glory and praise of God the Father."¹²

It's always a good time to re-stir our own baptismal waters by praying that the ears and lips of our hearts will, by the grace of God, grow ever keener and more articulate, helping us to become more skilled in assembling the kingdom of peace to which the Lord calls us, even if we suffer an occasional cut or two in the process.

¹⁰ Jn 18:36 (NAB)

¹¹ Mt 3:16 (NAB)

¹² *The Order of Baptism of Children*, United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2020), 49.