

January 8, 2023

The First Sunday after Epiphany

The Baptism of Our Lord Jesus Christ

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When I was 23, I spent a fall living in an intentional Christian community in the south of England. We would rise at 5:30 for an hour of silence, share Morning Prayer and the Eucharist together, and then have breakfast. There would be community prayers at midday before lunch for those who were around and not out at work, and evening prayers before supper at 6:30. At 9 o'clock there'd be night prayers, and then most days we'd keep silence till the morning. My favorite moments were the times when after supper and before night prayers one of the community members, Zoe, would pick up a guitar and play some of her favorites: Joan Baez, Carole King, and her favorite, Joni Mitchell. Whenever I hear the words "I've looked at life from both sides now" it takes me straight back to those precious evenings.

Several times during those vibrant back-porch moments I found myself possessed by an overwhelming need to walk away, to go to my room and write up the experience in my journal rather than keep on living it. I recall that urge to withdraw almost more intensely than the music and laughter themselves. Why on earth would anyone leave the room when it felt so warm, so accepting, as earthy and affirming as a great big group hug? I now look back and see that what I was confronting was a microcosm of the predicament facing every human being: what we might call the essence of the human condition.

Human existence is, for most people, good, but at the same time unavoidably fragile and profoundly flawed. Life is made up of good things – creativity, beauty, wisdom and love. But many precious things break, end, change, or die. This is the fragility of life. And however precious, most things have a dimension of disappointment, a tinge of poison, a texture of perversion that can sometimes be controlled, but never eradicated.

That's what I was getting in touch with when I had those surges of feeling that made me need to walk out on the singing. It felt so good to be there, but I was deeply conscious that life was fragile and flawed, and I so badly didn't want to be hurt; so I resolved to disappear before things came to an end or turned sour.

Think about how humankind deals with this predicament. There's maybe two conventional ways. One is to try to offset fragility as much as possible, and simply extend or strengthen or restore life at every opportunity. To use the guitar evenings as an

analogy, I'd have stayed there as long as I could, tried to persuade everyone else to do so, taken hundreds of photographs, and now, all these years later, be arranging reunions and still getting the guitar out and singing the old songs to try to preserve those special moments. Think about what a massive proportion of our nation's GDP is spent on healthcare in the last weeks of life. Isn't that what we're doing – trying to defeat fragility by keeping the songs playing as long as we possibly can?

The other conventional way, more linked to dealing with the flawed nature of life, is to escape. That can mean life as a series of exciting vacations, life in a fantasy world of computer games or Netflix or consciousness-altering drugs, life in a protected, sheltered community, or life in a self-contained ideology that explains and subdues all worrisome information. In some ways, escape was precisely what I was doing by walking out on the songs while they were in full swing: I was protecting a memory of an idealized community without having to face the flawed reality of what people were really like. In an increasingly technological world, life offers ever-more sophisticated forms of escape

And these two methods for coping with the human predicament, preservation and escape, are especially evident in the way our culture constructs religion. On the one hand is the offer of preservation: here Christianity or the church exists to hold together things that would otherwise fall apart, like values, character, family, nation, marriage, trust, community, even the economy and society itself. Life after death constitutes a long-term guarantee of the things we think we need, an infinite extension of what needs holding together. On the other hand is the offer of escape: here Christianity or the church gives us feelings or experiences that take us out of the tawdry world, save us from its cloying clutches, and keep us pure amid its muddied messes. Eternal life becomes the ultimate form of escape, a constant promise that we can walk out the room any time we choose and find ourselves in a better place.

When Jesus emerges from the shadows of Nazareth in Galilee and appears center stage at the River Jordan, where John is baptizing, this is the key question we and everyone involved are asking. What kind of salvation is Jesus bringing? How will he overcome the human predicament, that life is good but fragile

and flawed? Is he offering indefinite extension, as a miracle-worker who can push back the boundaries of mortality? Or is he offering wholesale escape, bringing down the curtain on history and ushering in a new dawn of righteousness and justice?

Notice that both of these models have deep roots in Israel's history – roots that the account of Jesus' baptism make explicit. The idea that life is good, but fragile, is rooted in the creation story. (When we hear of the Spirit descending on Jesus like a dove it's a clear allusion Genesis chapter one, which begins with the Spirit, or wind, sweeping over the face of the waters.) The idea that life is flawed, but that escape is possible, is rooted in the exodus story. (When we hear that Jesus went down into the River Jordan, we're reminded of the Israelites being led by God under Moses out of slavery in Egypt through the Red Sea and under Joshua across the Jordan to freedom in the Promised Land of Canaan.) So what kind of salvation is Jesus bringing? Is it preservation of creation, or escape from oppression? Is it chiefly concerned with overcoming death, or sin? Or is it something different?

To answer that question I want you to walk back with me forty years to Eastern Europe in the early 1980s. The people of Poland had been living under a Soviet-dominated communist regime since 1945. They'd seen uprisings in Hungary and Czechoslovakia ruthlessly suppressed by Soviet military intervention. And yet the shipyard workers of Gdansk, led by electrician Lech Walesa, found the courage to form a trade union, and go on strike, taking 17,000 workers out on the streets. The movement spread along the Baltic Coast, closing ports and drawing in mines and factories. Within a year, one in every three workers in Poland was a member of Walesa's movement, and Walesa was on his way to winning the Nobel Peace Prize. The movement was called Solidarity.

The Polish government was in crisis, and it reacted with the introduction of martial law and the arrest of the union leaders. All political protest was stifled. There was only one institution the government couldn't dismantle by forcible repression. And that was the Catholic Church. Over the next couple of years a young priest started to preach words of gospel truth and Catholic social teaching into the events taking place in Poland. His name was Jerzy Popiełuszko. His sermons were picked up by an underground

radio station and he gained a nationwide following. People started to see him as the first man who'd had the courage to speak the truth for 40 years. The government panicked. They fabricated evidence against him and tried to get him sent to prison. They threatened him and intimidated him. Nothing worked. He carried on preaching and speaking the truth regardless. On October 13, 1984 the authorities staged a car accident, again without success. Finally, six days later, Jerzy Popiełuszko was kidnapped, murdered, and bundled into a reservoir.

A quarter of a million people attended his funeral. Can you imagine – a 37-year-old priest who'd never had any prestigious appointment, squalidly disposed of by the authorities, and a quarter of a million people come to your funeral? It was the beginning of the end for the regime. Remember that Poland was the first Eastern bloc nation to throw off Soviet domination six years later. This was an event of momentous significance in twentieth-century history.

And it's all contained in that single word, solidarity. What does solidarity mean? It's everything we say in our letter of sympathy when a friend's loved one dies and we wish we could be there and hug and help and heal and hold. It's everything we feel when we see a protest movement in a totalitarian or oppressed country and we will the protesters to succeed and keep their heads and stay safe and find a better way for their country to live. It's everything we hope for when we see someone wrongly accused and falsely criticized and damagingly mistreated and we want to help them set the record straight and clear their name and find justice.

Solidarity means all the ways we seek to make concrete the intangible links between people, links based on love and trust and dignity and understanding and respect. Solidarity means all the ways we seek to be with people and stand alongside those who are in pain or sorrow, treated cruelly or unfairly, facing fear or the unknown. Solidarity is the word "with" turned into practical action, the word "understanding" turned into genuine support, the word "identification" turned into courageous acts of witness.

Solidarity is what the church is called to be – Christians standing alongside one another, standing alongside the oppressed, and standing alongside God in Christ. That's what Jerzy Popiełuszko

did. He stood alongside other Christians, he stood alongside the oppressed people of Poland, he stood alongside Jesus. He shows us what solidarity means. He shows us what the word “church” is meant to mean.

Because this is the salvation Jesus was bringing, when he came center stage in his baptism by John. Jesus’ salvation isn’t really about preserving life, although there is some of that. It isn’t really about escape, although there’s maybe a little bit of that too. Jesus’ salvation is about solidarity. Solidarity between God and us. Solidarity that makes concrete the intangible links between God and us. Makes them so concrete they can never be broken again.

In being baptized Jesus shows that salvation means solidarity. Here at the Jordan Jesus shows his solidarity with Israel, by making Israel’s story of creation and liberation his own. Jesus shows his solidarity with humanity, by making his flesh subject to the simple touch of hand and water. He shows his solidarity with sinners, by accepting the sign of the cleansing of flawed humanity. He shows his solidarity with the created world, by allowing his naked body to be clothed by water and air. He shows his solidarity with John the Baptist, by asking John to baptize him, rather than vice versa. And in return we see his solidarity with God, when the heavens are torn and the dove descends and the voice announces, “You are my beloved son.”

Baptism is the epitome of solidarity, because in baptism Jesus is immersed in the heritage of Israel, immersed in the fragility and flaws of humanity, immersed in the created world, immersed in the faith and struggle of John the Baptist. And at this moment of Jesus’ full immersion in the world he has come to save, God announces, “I am fully immersed in you. There’s nothing in me that’s not wholly invested in you. You are fully immersed in Israel, in humanity, in the created order: I am fully immersed in them too. You are the solidarity of salvation. You are my full immersion.”

So this is how Jesus addresses the human predicament. Not through preserving life. Think of Jerzy Popiełuszko: preserving the life of the Polish people would have simply condemned them to continued oppression. It was no different for Jesus. And not through escape. Think again of Fr. Popiełuszko: there was nowhere that the Polish people could escape to, that wouldn’t

leave them right back where they started. Jesus addresses the human predicament through solidarity. He is with us in our struggle, our suffering, our searching, our striving. As the Polish government so vividly discovered, that's a solidarity that sin and death can no longer break.

And in the process, Jesus redefines our predicament. It turns out our real problem, as human beings, is not the prospect of death, or the reality of sin: it's our alienation from God and one another. It's the fact that our links with God and one another are so intangible, so invisible, so thin, so ... practically nonexistent. That's what changes in Jesus. Jesus is the solidarity between us and God that makes those links tangible and visible and permanent and unbreakable. Jesus is God saying, "I've looked at life from both sides now."

Jesus is God saying to us, "I'm totally immersed in you." When we're baptized, God says to us, "Will you be totally immersed in me?"

