Sermon

Baptism of our Lord

12/1/20

Eltham

**Readings**

Isaiah 42:1-9

Gospel: Matthew 3:13-17

+FSHS

I’ve been watching the series *The Young Pope*. (That’s a bit of an understatement because I’m on my fourth watch through of the first series’ 10 episodes!) It’s a beautiful piece: visually splendid with stunning vistas of Rome and stunning costumes, an arresting soundtrack, an incredible nuanced and sensitive script, Emmy-award quality acting by Jude Law and Diane Keaton who play two of the leads, and a fascinating story. By either the breath of the Holy Spirit (a minor miracle in the eyes of some) or the Machiavellian machinations of powerful Cardinals, Lenny Belardo is elected as the youngest pope in recent history. And then starts to turn the church upside down and inside out with his conservatising reforms. A compelling thread throughout the series (and there are many of them) is the question of the young pope Pius XIII’s faith or lack of it. On the one hand, he berates the crowd in St Peter’s Square, and then the Cardinals gathered for his first address to them, for a lack of love of God. He wants to see fanatics set on fire with love for God, no more part time or half-hearted involvement. He says to the crowd: “God exists. And He isn't interested in us until we become interested in Him, in Him exclusively. Do you understand what I am saying? Ex-clu-sive-ly! Twenty-four hours a day. Your hearts and minds filled only with God. There's no room for anything else.” And yet, in private moments with the Father Confessor for the Curia, Don Tommaso, and his erstwhile friend Monsigneur Guitierrez Pius XIII AKA Lenny confides that he doesn’t believe in God, and we see the crisis of faith that is a product of being abandoned by his parents as a 7 year old, combined with a midlife crisis presumably kicked into overdrive by his election as pope, as well as the pressures of his childhood mentors who believe him to be a bona fide saint (he performed a miraculous healing as a 14 yr old). What’s intriguing about this is the depiction in mainstream media of the mystical paradox of God’s absence and presence (presence in absence), and the profound effect engagement in that search has on a powerful leader, and the institution he leads. “"My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" said Jesus before he was about to die. Which is what I say to you now, before I begin to live,” he prays in the first episode. And the response comes to him: “God’s infinite silence”. In the midst of the splendor and the gorgeous vesture, there’s a crisp, cold, stark reality in the way Lenny’s faith is portrayed, a yearning for the approval of the absent Father/Mother, and the affirmation “My son, beloved, with whom I am well pleased”, the ultimate confirmation of identity.

I wonder whether Jesus was expecting to hear that affirmation from the heavenly voice at his baptism. Matthew tells us he came to John to be baptized. John protests: I need to be baptized by you, and yet you ask this of me? And Jesus insists on it in order to “fulfill all righteousness”. And John consents. Note here the thread of submission and consent – Jesus doesn’t force his desire on John, John says yes. What is Jesus doing here? He’s honouring John’s ministry, affirming John (in Matthew’s schema) as the forerunner, Elijah come again to prepare the way of the Lord and make straight level highways in the wilderness. “Fulfilling all righteousness” is about right relationship – that between John and Jesus, Jesus’ dependence on and turning towards his Father, Jesus’ relationship to all those who follow him. “Fulfilling all righteousness” for Jesus is about “doing what God wants” (not merely fulfilling obligations), and at this point what God wants is Jesus’ identification with those who need to repent – John, the crowds on the banks of the Jordan, us. That action of “righteousness” brings forth a divine response which signals to everyone present that this one is different. Finally, in him the cry of the prophets, and saints and mystics, and all those who have longed for God, “O that you would tear the heavens and come down” is met. New creation emerges from the waters as the dove of the Spirit hovers once more as it did at the dawn of creation, this time anointing God’s Son and breathing in him what he needs to continue his identification with God’s people, and his mission to restore right relationship. Such affirmation! Such confirmation of identity and purpose: God’s son, the beloved, with whom God is more than contented, but well pleased. And what happens next is that Jesus goes into the wilderness for forty days and nights to work out what the hell just happened, and to ponder what that kind of power and identity means for him. How will he engage being God’s Son? God’s beloved Son?

The same question faces us, because we are identified with Jesus, share his life organically through our baptism. He’s the head of the body and we’re connected to him; he’s the vine and we are the branches and what happens to one affects all. If he is the beloved with whom God is well pleased, then we too share that identity. Ponder that for a moment: what does it mean for us to hear the heavenly voice declaring us to be God’s child/chosen, beloved, with whose existence God is well pleased?

It suggests that (pace Lenny Belardo/Pius XIII) far from God only becoming interested in us when we become interested in God exclusively, rather the declaration that we are God’s beloved, chosen, precedes our interest in God. God establishes right relationship with us in Jesus’ before we are conscious of it. The identity is there for us, in Jesus. That identity doesn’t change, even though we may not be conscious or aware of it, and that includes through the dark times, through the times in our lives when we feel like God’s packed up and shipped out and is now renting a room above a tire shop on the outskirts of town. Even when life, circumstances, our prayers, seem to meet only God’s infinite silence. In the midst of the suffering of the bushfires. In the midst of the terror of war and violence. In the midst of being confronted with our own mortality, or the mortality of those we love. Our identity as God’s chosen, beloved children doesn’t change. It doesn’t change when we do evil things, although I think like any parent, God’s heart breaks when we are not living righteously (in love for God and for each other), and yearns for us to turn again, to repent of our sins, and to embrace the true power of our identity as God’s chosen beloved.

Because that true power of our identity – shared with Jesus – as God’s chosen, beloved children with whom God is well pleased, is in the giving away of that power. Jesus stands in solidarity with those who feel unworthy of God’s love and grace, with those who are lost, last, least. His heart beats alongside theirs. We are called to carry on Jesus’ mission. It doesn’t matter how old we are, what our situation, our abilities, our deficiencies. God’s grace is at work, and our job is to recognize that we are called as we are to do the things Jesus did, for our hearts as God’s beloved, chosen, children, to beat alongside the hearts of those who are yet to know Jesus, those who are suffering, those who are searching. So that they too may come to hear that divine voice of love which tells them: You are my child, my beloved; with you I am well pleased.

The Lord be with you.

**And also with you.**