

HOMILY FOR FEAST OF THE BAPTISM OF THE LORD

BY FATHER PATRICK MILEHAM

About a year ago, I accompanied a group of people on a pilgrimage to the Holy Land. Now pilgrimages are fairly common in the Catholic tradition because not only can they be both enjoyable and very rewarding; they can also bring closer to God and deepen our relationship with him and with one another; in the Holy Land, this experience is particularly special because we touch so many places mentioned in the Scriptures; the places associated with the patriarchs, prophets and kings and, of course, with the life and ministry of Jesus and his disciples.

As part of our pilgrimage we visited the ancient site of Jesus' Baptism, the place where the events of today's Gospel reading are believed to have taken place. The site is situated on the banks of the river Jordan, about 5 miles from the northern shore of the Dead Sea; It's been rarely open to visitors since the 1967 war, because of its sensitive location on the border between Israel and Jordan. On the day we visited it was raining. It was cold, grey and miserable; reflecting the war-torn history of this site...the road to the site bore the marks of this with signs telling us to beware of mines.

It perhaps doesn't sit well with the glorious image we might expect when thinking of the holy places. So, in the drizzle, we gathered together, we prayed and we read the Biblical account of Jesus' Baptism. It was then that I noticed, far away in the west, the clouds beginning to break and the sun casting its rays onto the horizon. What these rays revealed to me was something I hadn't realised about Christ's journey. I didn't hear any voice from heaven or see any doves descending but I was forcibly struck with what I saw on the horizon. And what it was, were the three towers that stand along the ridge of the Mount of Olives, overlooking Jerusalem.

Being there, I was surprisingly moved by the thought that Jesus' public ministry, which began at his Baptism, there, by the banks of the River Jordan, ultimately led him to Jerusalem, to the place of his crucifixion, resurrection and ascension, there on the ridge of the Mount of Olives. You could see, very clearly, both the beginning and the end of his journey.

That journey, in a spiritual sense, is the journey which all of us are invited to imitate and called to follow. It's a journey that day by day draws us closer to Jesus, who strengthens us and nourishes us along the way. In the words of the Prophet Isaiah: 'He is like a shepherd feeding his flock, gathering lambs in his arms, holding them against his breast and leading to their rest the mother ewes'. The way he feeds us is of course by his word and his sacraments and in particular the Eucharist. It's also a journey in which we are never alone, we have each other, our families and parish communities to pray for us and support us along the way.

But we know that the most rewarding paths are never the easiest; they are filled with dangers and challenges. As Christ's journey from the Jordan to Jerusalem brought him trials, suffering and ultimately death, we are reminded that the journey which we take will challenge us and cause us to struggle; it's a journey that will also involve suffering because all of us have our own particular cross to bear. Maybe it's bereavement or illness or the breakup of a relationship; or maybe it's unemployment or hardship and the struggle to make ends meet. In less dramatic ways, our cross might simply be the challenges of family life and the daily grind. The journey with Christ is as much in the ordinary things of life as the momentous or life changing. If we do try to follow Jesus, and unite our sufferings with his, we can be confident that we won't be overwhelmed by whatever it is that burdens us.

Sadness and suffering are not the things that ultimately define us no matter how heartbreaking they are; because united with Christ, even death itself does not have the final word.

'You are my Son, the Beloved; my favour rests on you'. Let's not forget that these affirming words of God the Father, heard from heaven after Jesus was baptized, are meant not just for Jesus but to all of us. For those of us who have been baptized and adopted as God's beloved sons and daughters, it's right, in this Year of Faith which Pope Benedict has proclaimed, that we reaffirm our baptismal commitment to the Lord. So wherever we are on life's journey, in whatever place we find ourselves, let's always try to stay focused; focused on the One we are following, focused on our final destination, focused on the light that shines on the horizon, the light of the new Jerusalem; God's kingdom of justice, love and peace.