

Sermon by Fr John for the celebration of the Baptism of Jesus

Sunday 9th January 2022

Personal testimonies can be used to great effect. And this story of mine may serve a good purpose.

At the age of twenty-two I was in the Papuan coastal village of Hula, a village built over the sea - a short distance from coastal land and about 60 kilometres southeast from the capital Port Moresby. It was my first stop on the Papuan coast after arriving in the country one week earlier. Within two days of my arrival, I was to travel by truck to Sogeri, a well-established settlement in the Owen Stanley Ranges 40 or so kilometres east of Port Moresby (you pass by the end or beginning of the Kokoda Track). Eager to get going and despite the rain which had made the unsealed road impassable to vehicles, I decided to set out on foot with two Papuan men towards the London Missionary Society Theological College named after Ruatoka, one of the earliest Cook Island missionaries to arrive in Papua in 1872. The college was some twenty kilometres away. In my youthful enthusiasm to be on the move I wasn't going to wait for the rain to stop and the road to dry. I knew I could get accommodation at Ruatoka if the road from Hula remained impassable. I would at least be on the move and what was twenty kilometres of walking for a twenty two year old man.

Some five kilometres into the journey my plastic sandals pulled off my feet from the sheer weight of mud clinging to them. Walking bare foot and still carrying an overnight bag I started to see the error of my ways. The exaggerated belief in myself, my lack of knowledge about the effect of tropical rain, the increase in humidity now that the sun was shining, and that I was not used to walking barefoot on rough ground began to take its toll. The Papuan men took turns to carry my bag while stepping out in front with energy and purpose. I was beginning to crave a drink, any drink, and I eventually succumbed to thirst - getting down on my hands and knees to drink water like an animal from the puddles remaining on the dirt road. I had never been that thirsty before or driven to drink from off a road surface, but my thirst craved to be satisfied.

Later on I realized that my health was only saved from disease because the water I drank was recently fallen rain water. To rub salt into my wound the truck I was to travel on

caught up to my small group five kilometres from my destination, and although tempted to see my journey through on foot, I decided that wisdom was the better part of valour and climbed on board.

So, what did I learn all those years ago? Well, I learned what life without water was like. I learned that thirst would drive a person to drink from any available source that seemed reasonable. To drink water is life. I also learned that I had limitations which if ignored placed me at great risk. On reflection I also clearly remember that had it not been for the two Papuans travelling with me, and who chose to carry my bag, my situation would have been much worse. I would not have been able to travel the distance.

My story is a parable. Like the parables of the gospels my story presents a picture of a real-life event with substantial teaching embedded - in the same manner as the parables "The Prodigal Son" and "The Wheat and the Tares". So, my parable causes me to think about the significance water plays in everyday life and in Christian living.

Water has played an important role in Christian religion since its earliest beginnings. With its antecedents in Judaism and links to the baptism offered by John the Baptist the Christian Church has responded strongly to the instruction given by Jesus to his disciples to go into all the world and baptise.

From my experience of thirst in PNG I can see why the water of baptism signifies the reinvigoration of human life and why it can be the sacramental agent of change in the lives of those who seek reinvigoration in Jesus. I understand that the baptismal waters are as essential to human well-being as essential as the puddle of rainwater was to me to revive my spirit and keep me safe whilst on my journey.

The Church's catechism asks the question "What did God do for you when you were baptised?" The answer follows - "At my baptism, I was made a member of Christ, the child of God, and an inheritor of the kingdom of heaven."

We have a duty to call people to baptism because we know that those who are united to Jesus through baptism are united to God. Their baptism will be their rite of passage into union with Jesus Christ as they take their place in the community of faith, the church. They will have the sacramental life-giving baptismal water poured over them, which with the three fold declaration of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit provides the spiritual sustenance

required to live as a child of the Most High God. But like you and me they will from time to time forget the importance of their baptism. And like me on the track between Hula and Ruatoka Theological College, and perhaps you in your journey through life, they too will be reminded that despite an inflated opinion of themselves to survive their journey without God, God's acceptance of them remains constant.

No reference to baptism should ignore the gift of the Holy Spirit because the sacrament of baptism is a work of God the Holy Spirit. The Spirit of God descended upon Jesus at his baptism and it was only then that he began his ministry amongst people. So we believe that the Holy Spirit will descend upon those who are baptised, and pray God, begin their life's work as followers of Jesus to the glory of God. Some will argue that a sign of the presence of the Holy Spirit at and after baptism is glossolalia or speaking in tongues. That may occur as an act of ecstasy. But I'm with St Paul who argues that love is the greatest of the fruits of the Holy Spirit which together with joy, peace, patience, kindness, and self-control is described in my bible as the harvest of the Spirit. Galatians 5.22 - Revised English Bible.

My little story, my parable, will hopefully encourage you to examine your own parable born out of life's experience. But above all remember that your baptism no matter how long ago and at whatever age is a gift from God, who in the person of the Holy Spirit has blessed you for life in the kingdom of heaven.

Now I am going to pour water into the font and say prayers appropriate for this celebration. And then I shall move amongst you and sprinkle you with water blessed for a holy purpose. I pray that it will remind you of your baptism and of its benefits to you. I pray that you rekindle the joy of knowing you are destined to occupy a place in God's kingdom. I pray that you will examine your life and be excited by the harvest which by the grace of the Holy Spirit you and He will produce.