

THE SPIRIT OF THE LIVING GOD BRINGS NEW LIFE

“The Lord gives and the Lord takes away. Blessed be the name of the Lord.” That quote is a slight variation from the quote found in the opening chapter of the Old Testament Book of Job. Today, the Lord is giving. Today the Lord is doing something new. For today we will welcome into the Catholic faith the husband of one of our longtime parishioners. In just a few minutes John Higgins will be baptized into Jesus Christ and then confirmed in the Catholic faith. Later on he will receive Eucharist for the first time. You might be tempted to ask: why is this happening now in the middle of the corona-virus pandemic?

Good question. But when John first presented himself to begin his period of instruction, prayer and reflection it was nine months ago way back in September 2019. A lot can happen in nine months. In the span of nine months a woman can conceive a child, bear that child and bring that child to birth. All in the span of nine months. A lot can happen. Just think of how much has happened in just the past two months. Much of our lives have been truly changed.

And yet, some things do not change. In just a few minutes John will be baptized into Jesus Christ. John’s own faith journey has led him here. He is not sure if he has ever been baptized. There is no certificate stating as much. So in such circumstances our faith mandates that John undergo what is known as conditional baptism. I will baptize him but I will do so saying “If you have never before been baptized, John, I baptize you in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.” We do this conditional baptism because baptism as a sacrament needs never be repeated. Once baptized into Christ always baptized into Christ. So long as the baptism was with water and used the Trinitarian formula. But if there is uncertainty we opt for the baptism to remove any possible doubt.

John, the waters we use have been blessed and in addition we have added to these waters water from the headwaters of the Jordan River in which Jesus himself was baptized. We also have added water from the shrine of Our Lady of Fatima in Portugal where the Blessed Mother appeared to three shepherd children in 1917 while the First World War was raging. Mary told the children that they were to spread the message about the importance of praying the rosary, repenting for sin and asking God for an end of the First World War in which over 60 million people died. The waters of Fatima have curative powers to them. Interestingly, two of the children to whom Mary appeared in 1917 died the very next year of the Spanish influenza which itself killed over 50 million people worldwide. Much like our coronavirus is killing so many around the world today.

John, in the waters of baptism you will have any and all past sins washed away. You are baptized into Christ Jesus and He claims you as his own. This cleansing extends to every sin you have committed and to any sin done unto you. But in addition to the washing clean there is a second most significant gift given in this sacrament. The gift of the Holy Spirit is poured forth into your soul, to abide in you, to indwell your soul all the days of your life. This giving of the Holy Spirit is what marks Christian baptism as so unique. Why the Holy Spirit? Because it is

God's way of empowering us as human beings. It is the very same Holy Spirit which animated the Father's beloved Son whom we call Jesus of Nazareth.

Why is the giving of the Spirit so necessary? Because as much as we may want to live a good life or to follow the way set out for us by Christ himself, we are simply not able to on our own or left to our own devices or relying on our own strength of will or purpose. We may want to but we will not be able to. We need to be empowered to live and that is what Jesus came to do. To empower us to live. To show us the meaning of life. To model for us how to live. To establish for us the most important source of strength enabling us to keep God's divine commandments. So the Lord gives us what we need, an empowering Spirit.

My friends, we are, at times, called upon to embark on journeys for which the destination isn't always clear, to travel by means of paths and roads we have not necessarily traveled before. To move through the brambles and the dangers and the wilderness, in moments of deprivation and anxiety. And yet, we are a people of hope. John is joining us in this journey today. We do walk by faith and not always by sight. We seek the Lord's guidance, the Spirit's wisdom and courage, the conviction of our brothers and sisters, our spouses and children.

My friends, we live in this particular world and this world makes a lot of promises to us. Our world promises the freedom to shape our own lives, to choose what we want to do and refrain from doing what we do not want to do. This is the essence of the freedom which our world offers. It promises but does not deliver. But the Lord Jesus Christ offers us a greater freedom, a genuine freedom, a freedom that is really free. For, you see, so often the freedom that the world offers isn't really freedom. Ironically, it is a subtle form of slavery. Subtle because our world claims to be a world in rebellion against the powers that enslave while often it is actually in a world of submission to a very powerful deception, a very powerful lie. Namely, you can have it all. You can make life what you want it to be. You can decide on your own what things mean and which things are important and which are not. You can call all the shots. BUT this just is not true. It is a lie to which we are told we must submit.

Jesus offers us something quite different. He speaks of a kingdom of God where truth reigns and everybody counts, not just the favored or the wanted. Where the last will be first. A kingdom where forgiveness reigns as a possibility to everyone. Where each person no matter their status, age or development is respected. A kingdom where each person is offered a helping hand of friendship, a friendship which abides despite sin, a friendship rooted in love and which love is stronger than death.

That is baptism into Jesus Christ. That is who Jesus is. That is what John embraces wholeheartedly today. That is the grace in which we put our faith. That is what draws us to Eucharist to be fed. That is the one thing necessary for us to live a good life in this world. Welcome John into the believing community of the parish of Saint Anthony of Padua. A church in the Roman Catholic tradition of Christianity. And your home from now on.

May the Lord bless us today and give us his peace.