

Baptised - With Muddy Water  
June 20, 2021, Twelfth Sunday in Ordinary Time  
Gospel of Mark 4:35-41  
Fr. John

Two of our scripture readings today relate how God sometimes speaks to us amidst the storms and turbulence that we encounter in life.

In the first reading after Job has gone on and on complaining about how God has allowed all the bad things that have happened to him, God abruptly tells Job in no uncertain terms - who is he to ignorantly question the wisdom of the Creator?

In the gospel, Jesus reprimands the disciples for their fear and lack of faith when they are caught in a storm on the Sea of Galilee.

Yes sometimes it is good for us to get a good 'dressing down' as a first step in seeing things in a new and broader perspective.

Sometimes such a rebuke is necessary even for institutions that are supposedly working for humanity's betterment.

We have seen this happen to law enforcement agencies, as well as charity foundations, governmental, and military establishments. And of course, now, even the Church has undergone a severe but rightful scrutiny.

Needless to say, it's painful to undergo such excoriations even when they are warranted and deserved.

So these past few weeks have indeed been difficult, to say the least, to be a priest and a representative of the Catholic Church in Canada due to its complicity over the last 140 years with the federal government in its treatment of indigenous people, especially in regard to residential schools. Many indigenous and non-indigenous people are very angry with the Church and some have even left in disgust. And even though our Archbishop has written a compassionate and apologetic letter [which you can access on our parish website], I myself needed to take some time off to ponder the situation in my own way.

What I came up with, were some thoughts that might be more liturgically appropriate for the feast of the Baptism of the Lord, which comes in early January. However, I think they might be appropriate now.

All my life, one of my dreams, was to one day visit the Holy Land - the land of the Bible. To actually be at the places where Jesus lived and preached. And one of the places that I especially wanted to visit was the Jordan River - that very body of water the Israelites crossed over to reach the Promised Land and the river in which Jesus himself had been baptised by John. I often [rather naively] thought of the Jordan as a pristine, clear, gushing body of life-giving water - suitably symbolizing cleansing people of their sins like one of the effects of the sacrament of Baptism.

Well the opportunity to visit the Holy Land presented itself a number of years ago and this was my chance to get a glimpse of the river I had read so much about in the Bible. I even bought a special container to scoop up some of that precious water to take home with me as a souvenir of my visit.

When our tour group finally arrived at the Jordan, I was completely underwhelmed [that's right - UNDERWHELMED!]. The July heat, not to mention the many up-river irrigations projects, had drained the river down to almost a trickle. What water there was, was muddy and totally uninviting. I thought to myself: "Jesus was baptised in that!" It would have been like going for a swim in the scummy August waters of Wascana Lake. Yes - what a disappointment! I don't even think I bothered to fill the bottle I had purchased.

Much later, however, it came to me, that Jesus knew what he was doing. He wasn't afraid to immerse himself in the muddy waters of our humanity.

Due to the events of the past several weeks it has become even more evident that we are baptised into a Church that is far from pristine. It is a Church that has muddied itself over the centuries with scandals and corrupt popes. It has carried out the crusades, the Inquisition, and often used force and fear to 'convert' colonised indigenous people in various parts of the world. In more recent years, not only was it the residential schools but also the many cases of clergy sexual abuse and the attempted cover-ups that has lost the trust of so many. So I had to ask myself - has the Church itself become so institutionalized that it has lost its identity as a caring faith community and like waters of the Jordan, had the message of the gospel been reduced to a mere muddied trickle?

These are some of the questions which I had to ponder. My mind wandered back to that day when I first saw the Jordan River.

Despite my disappointment in seeing it in such a decrepit state, I did remember however, that its muddy waters still seemed to provide life and nourishment to the trees and plants growing along its banks. Its waters didn't need to be crystal clear to provide the moisture and nutrients needed to make the vegetation along its shores to flourish.

It dawned on me, that we who are baptised are not initiated into a perfect community. After all, it isn't the institutional Church that we worship, but the Christ who is swimming in the waters with the rest of us with all of our flaws and imperfections. And the waters are holy because Christ is there. And therefore we who are immersed in that same water are holy. Holiness does not imply perfection. It's a mistake a lot of people make.

Matthew Kelly, in his book, *The Biggest Lie in Christianity* identifies the lie as the belief that holiness is unachievable for the average person. So we leave it to a Mother Theresa or some medieval saint. However if we have ever read the real and detailed biographies of many of the saints, we will see that they too had muddied spiritual lives. The only difference was that they still maintained a belief that somehow God could still do something with them. And God can still do something with us as well.

So when people rightly criticize the Church as an antiquated, patriarchal, hierarchical institution with a sullied past, with falling memberships, often bumbling in its attempts in carrying out what Christ would have us do, I often think of the Jordan River in which Jesus was baptised. Maybe it's a reminder of how God is able to make straight lines out of our crooked ones and washes us clean with muddy water. He is still in the boat with us even when we want to jump ship.

In our Glory and Praise Hymnals, there are three selections that refer to the Jordan River. The first: *River of Glory*, contains the line - 'we are bathed in glory of God'; the second hymn: *Flow River Flow* - reminds us that we, the Church, must not become stagnant water in living out and proclaiming the gospel; and finally [my favourite] *Wade in the Water* - a spiritual which relates that to be a true follower of Jesus we have to immerse ourselves in the waters of healing, reconciliation, compassion, and justice.

These days, whenever I baptise someone, I am almost tempted to cloud the water a little as a reminder that they are being initiated into a less-than-perfect community. But that should not prevent us from wading in the water as Jesus did. For no matter what it may look like - it's still life-giving.

And so as the old spiritual says: 'Come to the river where the living waters rise, if you want to follow Jesus, you must come and be baptised.'