

FIRST WEEK IN ORDINARY TIME

Reflection by Mary Ellen Sheehan, IHM

Monday, 8 January 2024

Texts: Is 55:1-11; Mark 1:7-11

Most of us were baptized as infants with our parents standing at the baptismal font and also our Godparents. My Godfather was Uncle Maurice Clifford, my mother's brother. I remember driving my father, Patrick, several times from our Fairfield home in Gesu parish to Uncle Maurice's home on Cambria Street in St. Mary's Parish in Wayne, about a 40-minute drive. My Uncle Maurice and my dad, both born in Ireland, did not have much education, only about the equivalent to our sixth grade. On one of our visits, after I had returned from Louvain, Belgium with all the degrees I had gained there, Uncle Maurice leaned toward my dad with his forearm on his right leg and said, "*Pat do you know where we'd be if we had half the education of my Godchild, Mary Ellen?*" My dad responded, "*I don't know, Maurice. Where would we be?*" Maurice replied, "*We'd be in the White House!*"

Our infant Baptisms were followed by our first confessions in the second grade and then a few weeks later our first communion day with white dresses and veils for girls and white shirts and long ties for boys. Then, the bishop conferred confirmation on us during our seventh or eighth grades. Fortunately, the Second Vatican Council restored the *Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults* (RCIA). After a process of catechetical instruction, adults received all three sacraments together during the Easter vigil. We had an instance of this as Wendy, our assisted living housekeeper who was already baptized, received the Eucharist and Confirmation, then delegated by the bishop to a priest.

In Jesus's time, baptisms were performed for the Jews to cleanse themselves of ritual impurities. There is a text in Leviticus where God says that ritual impurities were transmitted when any Jew touched either a dead corpse or a leper. Can you imagine how the overly legalistic Scribes and Pharisees were amazed when Jesus touched the leper?

John the Baptist conducted such baptisms and when Jesus came to him, John said, "I am not worthy to stoop and loosen the straps of his sandals." It was servants who managed to stoop and loosen the straps of their masters' sandals so that they could take them off by shaking their feet.

John is therefore claiming the fact that he is the servant of Jesus. But they were related as cousins. John is exaggerating in our Markan text to proclaim forever the glory of Jesus the Christ who, coming out of the river Jordan, “... saw the heavens above being torn open and the Spirit, like a dove, descended upon him ... saying, ‘You are my beloved Son; with you I am well pleased.’”

Adult baptism for Christians was practiced up until the third and fourth century. Only when limbo came into being did infant baptism return since infants could not enter heaven, condemning them to remain in limbo for the rest of their lives. Thank God for Pope Benedict XVI who abandoned limbo from church teaching! I cannot imagine parents who had received adult baptism being without their children when their children were left in limbo for the rest of their lives.

The Book of Isaiah was written by the prophet Isaiah who wrote Chapters 1 to 39. It is called first Isaiah and the Book of Judgement. But our first reading is from Chapter 55, written by some of Isaiah’s disciples, and it is called the Book of Consolation. Indeed, it is the Book of Consolation. “*All of you who are thirsty, come to the water! You who have no money, come and receive grain and eat! ... Seek the Lord while he may be found, call him while he is near.*” Finishing off chapter 55 are verses 12-13: “*Yes, in joy you shall depart; in peace you shall be brought back. ... In place of the thornbush, the cypress shall grow; instead of nettles, the myrtle (an evergreen tree) shall grow. This shall be to the Lord’s renown and everlasting imperishable sign.*”

Let us ponder these words that the scriptures have given us today. Let us remember our baptisms, first communions, and confirmations, all of which have given us gifts of the Holy Spirit. What gifts have we received from the Holy Spirit and how will we use them today? Let us also ponder the gifts from the first reading. *For you were thirsty and I gave you water and hungry for I gave you food to eat.* Indeed, these are words of consolation and joy. Let us give our gifts away to give water to the thirsty and to feed the hungry all over this world.