

“A Well in Wales”

- Baptism of the Lord
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Today is the last day of the Advent/Christmas cycle of the liturgical year. It is curious for us here at Seattle U. in that our students were here only for the first week of it, which was also their exam week, and then this past week, the start of the Winter Quarter. It is the time of the year that revolves around the birth of Christ, our longing for that in Advent, and then his manifestation to the world. What we call “Ordinary Time” begins tomorrow as we pick up on the public ministry of Jesus.

As a kind of door or hinge or pivot between his birth, infancy, hidden life and the active ministry of Jesus, we celebrate today his baptism in the waters of the Jordan River, the Holy Spirit coming upon him, and the Father saying to him, “You are my beloved son; with you I am well pleased.” This Sunday celebrates our own baptism—however old we were when we were baptized—in water, with the gift of the Holy Spirit, and we being adopted as beloved sons and daughters of God in our brother Jesus.

Let me tell you of a very strong image I have of this reality from my own experience. In Northern Wales, close to the border with England, set against high hills is a famous Jesuit house called St. Bueno’s. Gerard Manley Hopkins did his theology studies as a Jesuit there and wrote some of his most important and beautiful poetry. It is now a retreat house. I made three 8-day retreats there years ago. On the first one it was suggested by my retreat director that I make a pilgrimage on foot to a well or spring six miles across the Clwyd Valley. I was told the spring or well, called Ffynnon Ffair—or Mary’s Well—had been a stopping place for pilgrims in Medieval times making their way to an even more famous spring or well called Holy Well, further to the North.

I set out with sack lunch and water and bible in a backpack and prayed my feet across the valley and river, down a path, in front of a farmer’s house, and found the well in a field. The spring or well is situated immediately in front of and lined up with the entrance of an abandoned stone church in ruins. The roof has fallen in, only some of the walls stand, windows and arches are tumbled down, large blocks of stones strew the ground inside the church surrounded by weeds. A church in ruins! The spring—which was used as the baptismal pool for the church—is set within an 8-point star or rim of rock. The water gently wells up, bubbles rising from somewhere deep in the earth, water trickling silently over the edge, a variety of green water plants thriving in the clear, pure, cold ever-flowing spring water. It has bubbled up for centuries and millennia long before the church was there. The shrine church was built there because of the eternal spring. I sat for hours by that well, letting bubble up in me whatever might come from within, always with the abandoned church in ruins within feet of the well and of me.

I wonder if this image might be a help for us this Sunday. How many of us think of our church as something like that: a church in ruins, roof collapsed, tumbled down and in disarray, abandoned by many, and not inhabitable? Old, ancient, aligned of course toward the East, toward resurrection, meant to welcome and hold and assemble people for worship. The structures of the church fallen down. No longer a holy place of pilgrimage in the lives of many, especially the young. Should we be discouraged? Is there hope? Can there be new life? I wonder if we spend too much time lamenting inside the church in ruins and need to dwell much more on the well.

The well is an image of our baptism as the people of God. The very life of Christ, his grace, his Spirit was given to us in baptism and his life in us was unsealed, opened up, and is always there bubbling up in us. We are the people of God baptized in Christ. Our baptismal grace, our adoption into the family of Jesus, the life of his Spirit in us flows on and on, up and up, pure, clear, life-giving, animating, inspiring. Our baptism is not over, it was only a beginning, the unsealing of the well of Christ’s life in us, always gently moving, stirring in us. We are not in ruins, fallen down, abandoned as the people of God, but alive. The wellspring of the Spirit of Christ in us laments the church in ruins and wants to rebuild it, make it new, welcoming, a glorious place for worship. And it can. We should never give up on the church because the well of the Spirit always flows, able to renew the church in every age.

On the feast of the Baptism of the Lord, we can ask ourselves what his baptism of us is doing in us, how is it being tapped, what water of the Spirit is being drawn from it? I think we need to know clearly that not some but all people are children of God, created, and embraced by God's love and compassion for his children. In baptism—already, like all, children of God—we were adopted as brothers and sisters into the very family of Jesus Christ and given his Spirit, his family traits, one in him. This grace, this likeness to Christ, is unquenchable, as is the water of the well in Wales. Tapping into it is tapping into the Spirit which allows us to hear the Spirit in the word of our scriptures so that they come alive. Drawing from the well of our baptism empowers the ministry of each of us as a brother or sister of Christ in whatever are the circumstances of our life. To pray is to drink from the well of our baptism. To taste the waters of this baptismal spring impels us toward union with all the baptized—who are just as baptized as we are such that we never repeat baptism—in ecumenical love and action. Filled from within by the very life of Christ makes us courageous in making him known to all of the children of God. Being alive from the waters of the well of baptism, constituting us as a people of God, keeps our hope and our love fresh to rebuild in our day however the Church is in ruins or abandoned.

If the season of Advent and Christmas was about the birth of Jesus Christ, this Sunday of the Baptism of the Lord is about our birth as Christians flowing into our life and worship. It is a very good thing to draw water from the well of this week, before we move into the ordinary days of the year.

Let me leave you with two passages from the Prophet Isaiah. One for the well, and one for the church in ruins.

The well:

With joy you will draw water from the wells of salvation. And you will say in that day: Give thanks to the Lord, call on his name; make known his deeds among the nations; proclaim that his name is exalted.

- Is. 12:3-4

The church in ruins:

O afflicted one, storm-battered and unconsolated, I lay your pavements in carnelians, and your foundations in sapphires; I will make your battlements of rubies, your gates of carbuncles, and your walls of precious stones. All your sons and daughters shall be taught by the Lord, and great shall be the peace of your children.

- Is. 54:11-13