

CALLED AND SENT: THE BAPTISM OF THE LORD C

There's this young family man called 'Steve', who couldn't believe what he had just done. In the middle of the priest's homily, he suddenly left his wife and children in the pew and walked out. He felt so angry that he couldn't sit still a minute longer. But he had no idea what his anger was about. Rather than embarrass his family further, he walked home from Mass on his own.

That afternoon he talked the matter over with his wife Sue, but neither of them could work out why he felt so angry. So he made an appointment with his priest for the following Tuesday night. Fr Paul suggested: *'Tell me everything you remember about Sunday morning, starting with all you spoke to when you arrived at church, and everything you can remember about the Mass.'* Steve outlined all the people he had spoken to, and what was said as best he could remember. But nothing stood out from the conversations which shed light on the source of his anger. He then made an accurate summary of the flow of the Mass up till the gospel. But he couldn't remember which gospel had been read and what it was about.

'It's interesting,' Fr Paul said, *'how you remember well the first two readings, but haven't got a clue about the gospel. So, let me remind you.'* The priest pulled a missal down from the shelf and read the gospel. As Steve heard the familiar words about John the Baptist and the baptism of Jesus, he became aware that he did remember hearing them on Sunday, but it was not till Fr Paul came to the last words of the text that he knew what his anger was about:

'And a voice spoke from heaven, "You are my Son, the one whom I love; I am very pleased with you".'

'As a grown man that's what I always wanted to hear from my father,' Steve said bitterly, *'and now it's too late, because he's dead.'* Tears came to his eyes as he let himself feel for the first time the deep hurt he had been carrying.

'Perhaps there's something you can do about it,' Fr Paul replied. *'Let's pretend that your dad is sitting right here in this chair.'* He pulled an empty chair over and placed it in front of Steve. *'Tell him how you feel. Don't leave anything out.'*

Steve stumbled over his words at first, but after a few moments he spoke passionately, pouring out everything he wanted to say to his father. When he was finished, Fr Paul looked at him and said, *'What do you think your father would say to all that?'* Steve thought for a minute and then replied: *'I think he would say what he used to say when I was upset and afraid as a child. He would pick me up, give me a big bear hug, and say: "Steve, I love you. There's nothing to worry about. That's my boy".'* When Steve left Fr Paul's office, he felt that a heavy load had dropped from his shoulders. For the first time since his father died, he felt at peace.

There are times in our lives when we need our parents, or some significant other, to re-assure and encourage us, someone to tell us who we are, why we matter, and why they have high hopes for us.

The time had come in the life of Jesus when he too needed re-assurance and encouragement

to find a new direction in his life. Luke, in our gospel story, tells us how this need was met.

It happened at his baptism by John in the River Jordan. What happened is cast in dramatic language. From the open heavens the comforting and empowering Holy Spirit comes down on him like a dove. A voice from heaven speaks: *'You are my Son the Beloved; my favour rests on you.'*

It's after this experience of hearing God speaking to him on the banks of the River Jordan, that Jesus understands that the time has come for him to begin his work on earth as God's Son and Servant. The words of the prophet Isaiah in our First Reading come to him. *"Console my people, console them,"* says your God.' It's as though Jesus has just heard God the Father saying to him: *'I have chosen you for this mission. Go to my people. Tell them that I love them. Show them that I love them. Gather them together and bring them back to me.'*

Now that he knew what was expected of him there would be no holding back. As we heard in our Second Reading: *'He sacrificed himself for us in order to set us free from all wickedness and to purify a people ... who would have no ambition except to do good.'* That's why he laid down his life for others - to his very last breath and his very last drop of blood.

We too, all of us, are dearly and deeply loved by God. He is our Father too. We are his sons and daughters. We have been made so by our baptism. We are also sisters and brothers of Jesus. We have been joined to his person at our baptism and sent out on the very same mission as Jesus – to show and tell people everywhere just how much God loves them.

As we celebrate his baptism and ours in our Eucharist today, then, can we re-open our hearts to God as people on a mission, as persons called and sent? Can we hear him saying to us once again those words that in effect Jesus heard from God: *'I have chosen you for this mission. Go to my people. Tell them that I love them. Show them that I love them. Gather them together and bring them back to me'?* And having re-heard them, can we re-imagine ourselves as persons deliberately reaching out to others with the heart of Jesus all through this coming year, re-imagine ourselves reaching out as missionaries of God's love to all others in our lives - at home, at school, at work, everywhere we go?

bgleesoncp@gmail.com