

Bishop's Reflection – 1st Sunday of Lent

Now that Jesus is baptized, the very next step is the wilderness, the place where the Israelites repeatedly tested God, worshipped an idol and failed to trust God in what He asked them to do. Where Israel failed, Jesus prevails.

Our faith tells us that Christ's victory is our victory; we conquer not simply by our own efforts, but by his. Though this point is made time and time again in Scripture, St. Peter puts it so well in today's Second Reading, "Christ suffered for sins once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous, in order to bring you to God... Baptism... now saves you – not as a removal of dirt from the body, but as an appeal to God for a good conscience through the resurrection of Jesus."

Baptism isn't so much a cleansing, in the sense that we have done something to justify ourselves before God, saying, "God, look at what I have done", as it is a fulfilment of God's desire for us, joining us to His victory over sin and death, so that we may find our righteousness in Him. And while, through Baptism, the stain of Original Sin is removed, we can never be so bold as to go without His grace. If, therefore, there is reason to boast, our boasting is in Him; for in Baptism we are united to the victory that has been won on our behalf.

St. Josephine Bhakita, a native of the Darfur region of South Sudan, put it so beautifully when she spoke of two suitcases, one containing our many works, the other the merits of Christ. "When the time comes," she used to say, "I put mine aside, and I offer God Christ's suitcase for inspection." Though she strived to unite her every act to that of Christ, she knew it wasn't by her own efforts alone, but by His.

Each time we come to Mass we are united to Christ's "once and for all sacrifice on the cross", made present for us so that we may have salvation in Him. Just as the ancient Israelites were joined to the Communion Sacrifices offered in the Temple in the form of a meal, so Jesus instructs us to join ourselves to His sacrifice on the cross in the form of eating and drinking. "Very truly, I tell you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you" (Jn 6:53). We come in faith, we come so that we may be joined to His marital covenant with us. Let us not fail in this most important of all appointments. Where we are grafted unto Him and we live our lives, no longer for ourselves, but for Him who died for us.

Though we will have our slip-ups, our blunders and times when we betray Him in our actions, words and thoughts, and there will be many times when we fail to do what we ought to have done, there is always the hope of coming back, for realizing that we cannot do it on our own, for asking for forgiveness and being re-united to Him again. Behold, we go into the desert with Him. Behold, we are going up to Jerusalem, where He will die for you and for me. This Lent, let us open our lives to Christ and every invitation He offers us: to prayer, to communal worship, to acts of charity and self-denial. Let us be joined to His victory over Satan in the wilderness; let us be joined to His victory over sin and death on the cross; let us be joined to His work, His will and His healing ministry in the world.