

Homily. Feast of the Baptism of the Lord. Year.A. 11/12 January 2020.

I've mentioned to you before that in the autumn and early winter of 1994 I was privileged to spend 4 months in Israel, living in the old walled City of Jerusalem while I studied Theology, Scripture, Archaeology and several other disciplines. The building where this took place was the French territorial Convent and Study Centre on the Via Dolorosa run by the Sisters of Notre Dame de Zion. Apart from dodging a few bombs, kidnappings and assassinations, which added their own particular flavour, I enjoyed every minute of my time in the Holy Land. As part of the course every week the group made a 1 or 2 day excursion to important sites in and around Jerusalem and Judaea. To this I added my own self-guided travels. We also spent a wonderful week in the desert and another in Galilee both of which are relevant to this Feast.

The land of Israel is similar to our own. In many places it even looks and feels like western Queensland, right down to the Eucalypts and water holes. It's a hot, dry, semi-arid land reliant on one season of rain which if missed soon leads to drought. Much of it is arid desert and so the coast is where most people live. As we're learning again here, water in Israel is limited and precious. Bathing is a relief from the relentless heat, washing and cleaning and giving life, energy and refreshment to people.

Water, this most scarce and sacred symbol was used in the time of John the Baptist and Jesus to represent a decision for a change of direction, new birth and a fresh start. The Jordan, being the only river of substance in the land, was the place for baptising. The crowds who were focused on

John's message and mission of renewal in preparation for the advent of the long awaited Messiah came out to him at the Jordan. They entered the River facing the East, facing the pagan lands as separated from God's favour as they'd chosen to become. There they confessed the ways they had failed to live God's Law and lovingly serve each other. Then they were immersed, we might say dunked under the water, being brought back up again, washed, refreshed and renewed. Finally, turning around 180 degrees and walked back west, back into the Holy Land of God's promise reborn. This was the process of John's baptism, the baptism Jesus chose to receive. It was a choice, it involved choices, words and actions rich with meaning in the River that defined the land.

Our Baptism uses the same water symbol. Our repentance, or if we are small, that of adults on our behalf, has the same purpose leading us to a cleansing bath, rebirth and new life. However, the limit we face isn't that of the land itself but that of eternity which is found in Christ's self-giving death and resurrection. Moreover, it is into Him, His Spirit, His Good-News and His promise of everlasting life that we are born again. Our turning around 180 degrees is our life-long Christian project for which we need reliance on God's grace, one another and our Church community of faith, our new family in Christ. Every Eucharist we share celebrates this Pascal re-birthing mystery, deepening the meaning of our Baptism while strengthening us to live out its call and purpose to serve the world and make Jesus Christ present in our times. Jesus' baptism began His public ministry, and now our birth into Him it is the foundation of ours to all.