

Baptism of the Lord Year A 2020

Early on in Alex Haley's best seller *Roots* comes a scene set in the Gambia in which a father gathers his new born son into his arms, and whispers a name into his tiny ear, because it is right that the one being named should be the first to hear it. Next, he whispers the name into the mother's ear, and she smiles. Only then is the name pronounced proudly to the gathered villagers.

This scene is followed by another in which the father lifts his child up to the heavens saying: "Behold, the only thing bigger than you!"

These scenes are crucial in understanding the purpose of the entire book; because they underline how we live each day under God's eternal gaze; and our dignity can never be entirely compromised by others.

Even those sold into slavery, beaten, maimed, abused, neglected and branded with a new name have an inviolable identity as a child of God. Our welfare and freedom may be limited by the inhumanity of others but ours is a sacred identity and will be vindicated by God's justice.

So, even though this child was transported to America as a slave, his story unfolds as a struggle for freedom, a resistance to ill-treatment and an assertion of human dignity; which becomes a source of pride to his descendants.

Every culture has its naming ceremonies. For Christians it is usually enacted as part of the ritual of Baptism.

This aspect is sometimes overshadowed by placing too much of an emphasis on the need to remove the 'stain' of original sin.

But at its heart Baptism unites us with the one who at his own immersion in the River Jordan saw the heavens open and heard the Father call him his Son, speaking words of love and affirmation.

This event marks the beginning of Jesus' ministry; after which he calls his disciples, proclaims the kingdom, tells stories that challenge and inspire, heals and comforts the sick and bereaved and confronts hypocrisy. Jesus did all this in the manner described in Isaiah's beautiful prophecy as one who has real impact without harming or disturbing the fragile, the hurting, or dismayed, the crushed reed or the wavering flame.

This is the manner in which Jesus embraces life as a call and response to eternal love. Life in all its complexity is something we can try to avoid but as the author Jeanette Winterson observes we are more true to ourselves when we face life head on with grit and determination:

"As I try and understand how life works – and why some people cope better than others with adversity – I come back to something to do with

saying yes to life, which is love of life, however inadequate, and love for the self, however found. Not in the me-first way that is the opposite of life and love, but with a salmon-like determination to swim upstream, however choppy upstream it is, because this is your stream.”

The image of a salmon might not be the most flattering comparison to make, but if we recall how the goal of every salmon is to return to the place of its birth and to do so, come what may; it bears comparison with the Christian whose goal in life is to return at the completion of this life to the one whose love brought us into being.

.....

“Fear not that thy life shall come to an end, but rather fear that it shall never have a beginning” John Henry Newman

©pcm 2020