

1-13-08 Homily by Father Larry Covington The Baptism of the Lord

When John pulls Jesus, drenched, out of the Jordan River, the skies open up and the voice of God is heard to say: “This is my beloved son, with whom I am well pleased.” These words are taken from the most hopeful prophecies in all Hebrew Scriptures---words straight from the Isaiah text we have just heard. Jesus’ baptism then is a baptism of public power----witnessed and corporately experienced every time we baptize, every time we commission ministers and ordain within our own community of faith. Yes, the hands of the community become the hands of God, passing on the power of the Holy Spirit, passing on those gifts, passing on the power to become God’s presence on earth----yes, hands blessing us so that we can become a blessing to others.

By quoting Isaiah 42, Matthew indicates just what kind of power Jesus is receiving----what Christian power was and is and continues to be. Let’s now look and listen and hear so that we can recognize the power in our lives.

First and foremost, Christian power is servant power----power fully emphatically embraced so that it can be fully and emphatically given away.

Isaiah’s words were first penned when Israel was still in exile-----without land, without influence, without hope. It would have made sense for Isaiah

to pump the people up with images and encouragements of a superpower future----a vision of military and political might when the enemies of Israel would be crushed and destroyed. Instead, the image of power that the prophet presents is an image of service----the gracious and life-affirming power of justice and liberation and freedom given away to others. God says, to Israel as well as to each of us, “You are my servants, I choose you, I will uphold you, I will put my spirit upon you. And, when you embody my power through servant-hood, then you will become my delight.”

There has been much talk and worry recently about the evolving role of the United States----the one remaining superpower in the world. In the post Cold War period, when fanaticism and nationalism are causing violent outbursts all over the globe, just what should be the military and political role of our country? Should we have gone into Somalia? Were we wrong to invade Iraq? How should we respond to the horrors of rape and murder in Africa?

More than ten years ago Stephen Rosenfeld writing in the Washington Post had this to say: “Should America act more or less with others, or should it act...more on its own? Should the large idea of the United States be collective security which involves a readiness to fine common policy with other countries and with international institutions, especially the United

Nations? Or should the large idea be national self-assertion and self interest, resting on the determination to keep the selection of means as well as ends mostly in American hands?

Purely political considerations may well lead us to answers grounded in American self interests, but a Christian answer to this dilemma is different. Christian power is only given to us so that it can build up the common good for all. It is servant power used to serve the needs of a united and interdependent world. Its power used with and for, not power used over and against.

And so, Christian power is servant power. It is also gentle power, the servant described in Isaiah “does not cry or lift up his voice, a bruised reed he will not break, a dimly burning wick he will not quench.” The servant used strength and authority not to control the other, but to heal gently and release the power of life around them.

Father Timothy Healy, who for a decade was president of Georgetown University, was, in the last few years of his life, head of the troubled New York Public Library system. Before his sudden death a few years ago, this commanding and influential priest was the confidante of several United States presidents, a valued guest at the most exclusive dinner parties, a towering intellect who could intimidate the most famous scholars in the

world. And yet, as one friend said at his funeral Mass: “Tim was bigger than life, but he was as gentle as could be. I don’t know anyone who didn’t feel bigger in his presence.” Timothy Healy was a transparent channel for the vigorous and transforming power of God, but it was a gentle power----used to touch and encourage and bless the individual lives of thousands of people. Finally, Christian power, as embodied by Jesus and described by Isaiah, is persistent power----power that does not grow faint, cannot be crushed----power that even a cross and a tomb cannot destroy---power that even 2000 years of troubled, fainthearted Christianity has not been able to extinguish. It is power that permeates and inspires and nourishes life long after one’s personal power is gone.

There is an old folk tale from India that summarizes our thoughts this morning. It seems that there was a good king who ruled wisely and ruled well. One day the king called his three daughters together and told them he was leaving on a long journey “I wish to learn about God, so I need to go away and spend a long time in prayer. In my absence I will leave the three of you in charge. Before I leave I would like to leave each of you with a gift, a gift I pray will help you learn how to wisely use your power to rule.” And then he placed in each of their hands a single grain of rice.

The first daughter tied a long golden thread around her grain of rice and placed it in a beautiful crystal box. Every day she looked at it and reminded herself that she was powerful. The second daughter took one look at the common grain of rice, and threw it away, thus squandering her father's gift. The third daughter just looked at her grain of rice for a long, long time---- until she finally understood what to do with it. She went outside and planted it in the ground. And it became a seed, giving life beyond itself, eventually turning into vast fields of hope and nourishment for others.

When the king returned years later, he asked the three daughters what they had done with their grains of rice. Though he was polite to the first two, he did not respond to their explanations. It was only after the king saw the fields of grain resulting from his third daughter's wisdom that he responded with delight. Taking off his crown, he placed it upon her head saying, "Beloved, you alone have learned the meaning of power."

Brothers and sisters, this day we remember the blessings and power of our baptism I pray that all of us will continue to be God's delight----powerful servants----pouring out our power for the hope and nourishment of the world.