

Baptism of the Lord

January 12, 2025

“The people were filled with expectation . . .”

Expectations I believe matter. And I don't have to tell you that. We all know that from experience. When two people entering into marriage have the same expectations, it gives them a firm footing upon which to begin their lives together. But when those expectations don't coincide, when don't match up, it can be disastrous. And when an employer and employee have the same expectations, it can be truly beneficial for both parties, truly be a stable work relationship that can go on for years. But if they don't have the same expectations, the employee will almost certainly be looking for a new job sooner rather than later.

When a teacher and his / her students are on the same page (so-to-speak) really good things can happen. But when those expectations are different, very little learning is likely to take place. And when people living in an apartment building expect the same things from one another, harmony is almost sure to follow. But if no one

can agree on what is acceptable behavior, it can be a tough environment to live in.

Yes, expectations matter.

“The people were filled with expectation . . .”

That’s the way the Gospel passage we just heard begins. “The people were filled with expectation . . .” Of course, that’s why they went out to the desert in the first place, to hear what John the Baptist had to say, to see what John was all about. So what exactly were they “expecting”? Well, it’s hard to say with absolute certainty. And of course, not every single person had identical expectations. The most obvious answer (and the one that is explicitly mentioned in the text) is that they were wondering whether John was the Messiah. John made it perfectly clear that that was not the case. But I think it goes way beyond that.

After all, John preached repentance, and used a ritual bath, in other words, baptism to signify that. So if people were flocking to John it must also have been that they were longing for something, searching for something, not simply regarding a Messiah, but regarding themselves. John was telling them that they NEEDED to be different,

that they COULD be different. John made sure that they knew they needed to change, they needed to be holier, they needed to be more faithful, that's to say that they needed to repent of their sins and be renewed.

Put it in another way, it seems to me that people raced out into the desert because they wanted to be more, because they believed they could be more, they believed that God wanted them to be more. The way things were, was not good enough. Something better was out there, better for themselves as individuals, better for the Jewish community, better for the world. And John made sure they knew where and to whom to look for.

“The people were filled with expectation . . .”

My dear friends, today we gather in faith on the Baptism of the Lord. And we do so not simply to reaffirm who Jesus is (no matter how extraordinarily important that is), but also to reflect on our own baptisms, what it meant back then, and what it means now. For most of us, we were baptized as infants. That means that adults, in other words, our parents in almost every case, made the decision for us. And they did so out of love but also with certain hopes and expectations. They hoped that we

would grow up to love Jesus. They hoped that we would stay tethered to the community of faith we call Church. They hoped that we would grow up to be kind and generous and compassionate and merciful and faithful. In other words, the day we crossed that threshold, the day we were united to Jesus in a profoundly intimate way, our parents and family and friends wanted beautiful things FOR us and FROM us. They knew there was no limit to what we could become.

The question is do WE still have those same expectations? Those same hopes? Those same dreams?

Maybe we've stopped thinking it's that important. Maybe we think all we need to do is not do anything too bad. Maybe we think we can remain on a kind of spiritual "cruise control" where everything stays exactly the same and where nothing needs to change. Put it in another way, maybe we feel that our baptism was just something that happened long ago, not something we need to live out each and every day. It can be really difficult and painful to think about some of these big questions. After all, we all fall short of perfection in countless ways. And since we can't be absolutely perfect, maybe we've kind of

stopped trying. Yet, what we expect from ourselves is only half the question. What also matters is what God expects from us and for us.

And that's why expectations truly matter in the spiritual life. If OUR expectations and GOD'S expectations don't match up, we can never be the person God created us to be, never be a fully human being let alone becoming "fully alive". We will always continually fall far short, WAY short, and will experience life in a diminished way, in a way in which peace and joy and meaning are only dim shadows of what they could be.

But if we align our expectations with those of God, if we strive to remain close to the Lord Jesus, if we truly want to BE more for ourselves and others, who knows what might be possible? My dear friends, our baptisms might have been long ago, but the grace is still there, the calling is still there, our Lord Jesus is still there, expecting wonderful things from us. Let's expect the same and strive to make them happen.