

PURIFICATION

If you were to be asked to tell the story of your life, what would be your opening sentence?

I heard a delightful story recently about a lay chaplain guiding some 11 year olds in a retreat experience. They were taken through a standard guided meditation in which they were waking with Jesus along a lovely beach. The Chaplain said “What do you say to Jesus and how does he reply?”

In conversation with a young boy over lunch he asked how the experience had been. “Okay” said the young guy. “What did you say to Jesus”. Without hesitation the boy with great confidence said: “I looked at him and said, how do I really know that you are who you say you are?” Not a bad question – maybe the top Christological question -not that the youngster could spell Christology. How do I know you are who you say you are?

“So, what did he say”, the Chaplain asked: “He just looked at me and told me my story.” The Chaplain was awe struck, simply awe struck. The young boy shrugged and got on with the next piece of pizza. As T.S. Eliot said, “we can have the experience and miss the meaning!”

To be told the story of our life by Jesus is at the heart of today’s feast of the Presentation. This was why God entered our world through the incarnation to tell us the story of our life, not from our perspective but from His. When God enters the temple – everything is seen in a different light. So, if God was to tell you your story, how different would it sound? The Lord enters His temple for a reason and that reason was so graphically revealed in the liturgy that began this Mass: In the introduction I said:

“So, let us also, gathered together by the Holy Spirit, proceed to the house of God to encounter Christ”.

But more particularly, go back to the prayer that blessed these candles that we carried:

“O God, source and origin of all light, ...we humbly ask that, in answer to your people’s prayers, you may be pleased to sanctify with your blessing these candles, which we are eager to carry in praise of your name, so that, treading the path of virtue, we may reach that light which never fails.”

Our motivation for coming to Mass and participation in that procession was to 'encounter Christ'. How?

By encountering the 'origin' of light who invited us to become a light for others and bring them to the 'light that never fails'. Sound too good to be true? Then you will never believe what I am about to share.

Koden is a village in the eastern part of Poland that forms the border between Poland and Belarus. It is home to a famous Marian Shrine of Our Lady of Koden, itself having a fascinating history. It is not, however, to the shrine that I want to bring our attention but to one of the Oblates of Mary Immaculate who staff the shrine, his name is Fr Wieslaw Nazaruk. I met him in 2019 after giving a retreat when the sisters and I went for a picnic and called into the Shrine. Fr Wieslaw was the priest who happened to greet us. Some of the sisters knew him and pursued him to tell me his story.

In 1991 he and another Oblate priest volunteered to go to the far north of Canada to minister to Indians and Eskimos, some of whom needed to fly by plane to get to Sunday Mass. The Bishop who had come to recruit volunteer priests had given them the good news, they would only minister ten months of the year. The last two months are too cold in that area that even the Eskimos migrate, so this would be holiday time!

In 2016 Fr Wieslaw went with his priest friend to a coastal resort in Mexico. Not only for the sun, but more especially the beaches, Fr Wieslaw loved swimming and was an extremely experienced swimmer. It came as no surprise to his companion when one evening Fr Wieslaw announced that the next day, he was going to get up very early before anyone else was up just to enjoy the beautiful surroundings. The next day he did exactly this and walked and prayed as he took in the spectacular view and the ocean before him.

As he walked an idea began to form, the sea was as flat and as calm as he had ever seen it, so why not swim? It was simply too inviting. He changed quickly and went into the water and swam. Being an experienced swimmer, he soon realized that the calmness was deceptive because there was an extremely strong undercurrent. But he thought he could handle it, yet the current seemed to push him further and further away from the shore. It also got stronger, as did the waves. He was now quite a long distance out and realized he really was out of his depth and began frantically trying to swim back to the beach, but the current and waves were simply too strong and swept him further and further.

The waves became so strong that they were pushing him further down into the water and he was struggling to get to the surface to retrieve his breath. He was naturally becoming tired and the waves threw him further down until the most tremendous wave came with an undercurrent so strong that he could not back get to the surface, he was too exhausted.

He knew exactly what was happening he was lost and drowning and there was no way he could get back. He simply resigned himself to the fact he was going to die. He sank further and further down into the water: 'Into your hands, Lord, have mercy.' He felt his body hit the ocean bed. Then it happened.

Up to this point you may still be with me – from here on you may leave me behind. As he hit the bottom with a thud, he crumpled up in a foetal position and he could see himself surrounded, encased in a huge bubble of light. Instantly he thought to himself: 'Am I dead?'

The thought was not even completely formed before he became aware that next to him was an even brighter shaft of light which seemed to push him forwards and brought him into a space that was full of light and full of people whose faces he could not see but instinctively he knew that they were waiting for someone. Again, the thought pounded in his head "Am I dead?" "Am I dead?"

Then he heard a voice, a voice he knew very well, it was the voice of his father who had died some five years earlier: "Wieslaw you know the answer, you know whether you're dead or not". "Who are these people?", Fr Wieslaw asked. "These are the people whose lives you influenced, by your smile, your words of your kindness, forgiveness and the words of your homilies." "So am I dead?" was Fr Wieslaw's question.

At this the light seemed to push him to go further into a space where there was even more light and more beauty. When telling me this story Fr Wieslaw stopped at this point struggling to find the right words searching my face to see whether I thought he was mad. He continued: "Then, then I saw him. I knew instantly who he was. The love, peace, joy mercy was radiating from him, I knew I was in the presence of Jesus and so I said: "Am I in heaven?" and he said, "Not yet". "Am I dead?" He said, "Not yet. You've a choice to make". "What choice?" Fr Wieslaw asked. "You can stay here, or you can go back". "But I don't want to go back". "I know, that's why it is your choice to make". "Why would I go back, now that I have seen you?" "You need to prepare people". "How do I do that?"

"Tell them what you preached before but with more conviction. Tell them about just how much I love each person. Tell them how I long for each one to come into the light. To be immersed in Me. Tell them how much I wait and long for them

to meet with me. Tell them I am real and can be meet each day in the things around them in the story of their life. Tell them I look at them all the time - I never take my gaze away. I look with love and fill the darkness with light. Tell them the truth. It's your choice."

"But I don't want to leave you". Then Jesus said, "But I never leave you; the light is within, you carry it always, look to the light and you will find me, it never goes out. Stay close to the light and it will lead you. It's your choice".

Fr Wieslaw then said: "I had not even put my thoughts into words that I would go back when I was back on the ocean bed, in the bubble in a foetal position". He then said to himself rather than anyone else, "So how do I get back?" With that the light that had never left him spoke, it said: "Well stand up." So, Fr Wieslaw stood up and to his utter amazement his head came above the water and he could see the beach with crowds of people looking out with vehicles with flashing lights. As soon as they spotted him some came into the water and they assisted him to the ambulance.

"How did you get back?" they asked, "We saw you walking along the beach and then prepare to go into the water. You clearly did not see the red flag – signalling danger. We saw you disappear into the water, come up again then you were dragged down again until you did not appear again". "How long was I under the water?", Fr Wieslaw asked, "About twenty minutes", they responded. Having examined him the medics found nothing wrong; all his vital organs were normal. Having nothing to keep him for they released him.

Returning to the hotel, his priest friend was just coming out of breakfast: "Hi, have a nice time, see anything wonderful?" Fr Wieslaw, like the young boy I spoke of earlier, shrugged his shoulder, it was what it was! As he walked me to the carpark, Fr Wieslaw took my arm: "It could have been an illusion; I've had worse nightmares, but I will tell you this, true or not, since that day there has never been a day when I have woken up sorry that I was not dead enjoying eternity. When you been in that light, that love, that presence, everything else is empty."

This reminded me of the opening world of *Lumen Gentium*:

"Christ is the Light of nations. Because this is so, this Sacred Synod gathered together in the Holy Spirit eagerly desires, by proclaiming the Gospel to every creature, (1) to bring the light of Christ to all men, a light brightly visible..."

We are those who are eager to bring others into this light - the light that brings true meaning to our story. We can carry candles though that is not the point – will we radiate the light? – that is the invitation.

Abbot Robert Igo, OSB

2 February 2022