

Let It Be

In the name of Jesus the beloved Son of God, dear brothers and sisters in Christ: I hope I didn't throw anyone off with this morning's sermon title. But just in case I did, no, it doesn't refer to one of the Beatles' most popular songs: *Let It Be* by Paul McCartney – a song for which I confess I've never understood the lyrics. But since I went with "Let it Be" as the sermon title, I decided to try to find out what the song was about. Here's what I discovered: it turns out that Paul McCartney was suffering from an extended period of depression. And then one night he had a vivid dream in which his mother appeared. Her name was Mary, and she had passed away a year or two earlier. In the dream, she sat stood before him for a bit, then reached out her hand, touched him, and said, "Let it be". Apparently this was revelation to Paul. "What profound wisdom", he thought. It was enough to shake him out of his deep melancholy – so much so that he woke up, wrote the song, and from it he made a whole boatload of money, which *really* cheered him up. But this explains the lyrics: "*When in times of darkness, Mother Mary comes to me, speaking words of wisdom: 'let it be'.*" And no, let's not sing the refrain together. Here, I always imagined that it was some kind of Roman Catholic thing with "Mother Mary" and all – which didn't make sense because I didn't think any of the Beatles were Catholic. And so this helps me understand a little; but it still doesn't explain what "let it be" is supposed to mean. What *is* it? Does it mean "Leave it alone?" Or "Stop picking at it"? (That sounds like something a mother would say.) Or is it something more transcendental like "Hey man, things are the way they are, y'know? Ya just gotta *let it be* and go with the flow"? I don't know ... maybe the song was so popular because anyone who heard it could make up their own meaning for it.

Thankfully such is not the case in today's Gospel in which Jesus tells John the Baptizer, "Let it be." Here the meaning of the words is very clear. Jesus is telling John that he must allow this thing to take place that he doesn't want to do. You see, John doesn't get it. He doesn't want to Baptize Jesus. And that's because John understands Baptism – it's a big part of his ministry. And what John understands about Baptism is that it's for sinners. People come to John confessing all of the sin and wretchedness in their hearts. And repenting of all the rotten things they've thought, said, and done against God and their neighbors, John takes them into the Jordan River and gives them a spiritual washing, a clean new start; their sins washed away so that they can rise up, go forward in the Lord's forgiveness, and try again with a clean slate to live as befits one of God's chosen people.

And that's why John is so stunned that Jesus has come to him for Baptism. John knows that Jesus has no sins to confess. He has lived a perfectly righteous life. And what's the point of being cleansed if you're already clean? More than that, John thinks that it's insulting to Jesus for him to be baptized. It demeans him. It implies something that's not true. And John doesn't want any part of casting dispersions on Jesus' name. "You should be baptizing me", he protests. "I'm the sinner, not you."

"No", says Jesus, "Let it be so for the time being, for this is the proper way for us to fulfill all righteousness." As we heard, at that point John stopped objecting and baptized the Lord; but I'm not sure that John understood why it was necessary. Even today most Christians still don't understand. The most common explanation I hear is that Jesus needed to be baptized because the Lord requires Baptism. He had to fulfill the Lord's command. The trouble with that explanation is that at the time of Jesus' ministry, the Lord didn't require Baptism. The command

of Jesus to baptize and its status as the initiating Sacrament of the Christian Church doesn't come until after the Lord's resurrection.

So, what's going on? The key to understanding why John had to let it be is found in the words "to fulfill all righteousness". The question is whose righteousness is being fulfilled by Jesus' Baptism? Jesus, we know, has no sin; so he doesn't need to be baptized to fulfill his righteousness. He's already righteous. Well, then it must be that Jesus needs to be baptized in order to fulfill someone else's righteousness. The question is whose? At first brush, you might guess ours since we are the ones who are most obviously not righteous; but that's not correct. The surprising truth is that Jesus is baptized to fulfill the righteousness of God.

What? Pastor, are you saying that God is not righteous? No, relax; that's not what I'm saying ... although I will say this: over the course of human history, indeed, in your own life, God has not always acted righteously. And you should be very grateful for it. Would you really want the Lord to treat you fairly – according to his perfect and unyielding standards of justice? I don't think so; because if he did, you'd be in hell at this very moment and there you would stay forever. That's what you by your sins deserve. That would be absolutely righteous. That's what a righteous judge should do: punish evildoers according to their crimes. So, please understand: by not punishing us for our sins, the Lord lays himself open to the charges of being unrighteous, of not taking his own Law seriously, and of being a bad and unjust Judge.

He can't do that. And that is why he sent his Son into this world. That's why God, the Word, became flesh: to stand in the place of sinners and take upon himself the punishment we deserve in order to fulfill the righteousness of God. And that's what we see Jesus beginning to do in his Baptism. Now as he officially begins his public ministry, he identifies himself with sinners. He stands in line with the rest of the multitude waiting to be baptized by John, numbered with the transgressors. Though he is not a sinner himself, he allows himself to be seen and treated that way – by other people, and most importantly by his Father in heaven.

And actually, it's much more than that. Perhaps this illustration will help: many times I've heard about how in the old days, before there were the conveniences of indoor plumbing and hot water heaters, taking a bath was a major chore. This was especially true during the winter months. I mean you had to fill the tub (if you had one) with buckets of water you carried in from the hand pump well out in the yard. Then you had to boil water on the woodstove in the kitchen and pour it in to the tub to take the chill off the water. You'd have to do that several times to bring the water up to a comfortable temperature, which of course presupposes cutting and toting all the firewood needed to keep the stove going. Anyway, because it took so much effort, bathing took place much less frequently than we do today; maybe once a week (if that often). And it was a family event: once the bath was full and warmed up, everybody in the family took their turn. And as a rule, they had big families in those days. So picture this, if you will: let's say that you're part of some big family here on the Iowa plains around the time of the Civil War. In your family there's dad, mom, say ten or twelve and kids, and maybe a couple of grandparents all living under the same roof. It's Saturday, so it's bath day because tomorrow we to go to church. And because we don't bathe very often, we're all pretty grimy and gamey. We get the tub scrubbed out, fill it with water, and we're dumping kettlefuls of hot water into it to warm it up. If we have any houseguests, they get the honor of going first. They get to bathe in the cleanest water. And then everyone else takes their turn by whatever pecking order the family has worked out. Now, here's the question: how would you like to go last? With more than a dozen people's funkiness in the water – not to mention the scum from the greasy feeling homemade soap floating on top? Eew.

Now, ask yourself this: After everyone else had bathed, what would happen if someone who was already clean got into the tub? Why, he'd come out much dirtier than he was when he went in. *That's* what's going on in Jesus' Baptism. John is baptizing sinners in the Jordan; thousands of them. And each of them is confessing a long list of sins – sins which are washed away, and into the water they go. The Jordan has become a whole river of sin. And now here comes Jesus who is pure and holy. He has no sins to confess. So instead of getting clean when he goes into the water for his Baptism, all that filth and grime sticks to him. Or to be a bit more precise, Jesus is more like a sponge absorbing into himself the sins of multitudes. And not just the sins that were washed into the Jordan by John's Baptism; but the sins of everyone who's ever lived before and since. For the righteousness of God to be fulfilled, Jesus must take upon himself the sins of the whole world.

So, interestingly enough, when Jesus tells John that he must *let it be* for now, Jesus, by being baptized, is saying the same thing to his heavenly Father: "Let it be. Let it be to me according to your will. Let it be that I fulfill the mission I was sent into the world to accomplish. Let it be that the sins of the world come upon me. Let it be that you treat me as a sinner – the only sinner." It's the same thing he prayed in the Garden of Gethsemane. "If there's any other way, let this cup of suffering pass from me; but if not, let it be to me according to your will, not mine." And that's what Jesus did. He let it be. He took the sins of the world upon himself and carried them to the cross. There he let it be according to God's plan to save us. He let himself be scourged, he let the crowd and soldiers mock and spit on him, he let himself be nailed and lifted up, he let the world reject him, he let his Father condemn him. And even in death he commended himself to the hands of his heavenly Father.

And this is what the Father finds so pleasing in Jesus at his Baptism: the will of his Son in complete and passive submission to his own will. So much so that he opens up the heavens and announces it to the world, "This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased."

It's the same thing, I should add, which he finds pleasing in all of his children. You think about the Virgin Mary, when the angel came and told her that she was going to bear the Christ child. She didn't understand how it could happen. To be sure, it was a miracle beyond human understanding. But when the angel explained what she could understand, she humbly replied, "Let it be to me according to your word." And at that moment the Christ child was conceived in her.

For a negative example, we could take Peter early on the night Jesus was arrested. You remember that Jesus began to wash the feet of his disciples. It was a low task, one considered beneath the dignity of a slave. And here he was, their Lord and master on his hands and knees, washing their smelly feet and wiping them on the towel he had wrapped around his waist. When he came to Peter, Peter didn't want to let Jesus do it. In that way he was a lot like John the Baptist. He didn't understand. He tried to stop Jesus, "You'll not wash my feet", he told Jesus. But Jesus replied, "Unless you let it be, unless you let me wash you, you have no part of me." And at that point Peter submitted. He let it be according to Jesus' will so that in what was another beautiful picture of Jesus' Baptism, just a few hours before his crucifixion, Jesus served his disciples by taking their uncleanness on himself.

And this is how the Baptism of Jesus relates to us. Because Jesus went into the water to take on our sins, when we are washed by him in Holy Baptism, our sins also are placed on him. And then too, what happened at Jesus' Baptism happens to us. When our sins are transferred to Jesus in Baptism, the heavens are opened to us. The Spirit of God descends and comes upon us – that's the Spirit of Christ, by whom we are empowered to relinquish our own

sinful, selfish wills and say to the Lord, "Let it be to me according to your will." And the Father says to us, "This is my beloved child in whom I am well pleased."

And for Christ's sake he is pleased with us – not just at the moment of Baptism, but as we move forward in Christ living in our baptismal grace. How? By continuing every day to confess our sins, by repenting of them, and by hearing again God's word of forgiveness for Christ's sake. And too, like Mary, with the Spirit of God we have been given, to humbly keep on saying to the Lord, "Let it be to me according to your will."

This is necessary because there are plenty of things that happen in this life that we don't understand. When they occur, they strike as wrong or unfair. We ask, "Why would the Lord do this? Why did the Lord allow it to happen? It doesn't make sense to me!" The point is that it doesn't have to make sense to you. It's enough to know that your heavenly Father who alone is all wise has a reason for it. He knows how to bring good from evil – we see it on the cross of Jesus. He knows how to make injustice work to your advantage. We see that every day that we aren't punished as our sins deserve. With the Spirit of Christ we have been given our part is not to tell the Lord how to do things, but to place our trust in him and say, "Okay. I believe. I trust you. I've already seen the proof of your unfailing love in giving me your Son, in washing away my sin, and making me your beloved child and an heir of your heavenly kingdom. Therefore let it be to be according to your will. I know you will always do what is best for me."

With that understanding, then, I can't think of a better prayer for us with which to start the New Year than this: Lord, let it be. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria!