

A sermon preached on 1 Epiphany, Baptism of Our Lord, at Trinity, Wethersfield, CT
on January 9, 2022 by The Rt. Rev. Gordon P. Scruton. Luke 3:15-17, 21-22

On the first Sunday after Epiphany, we always celebrate the Baptism of Jesus. As the light of the Epiphany star guided the wisemen to worship Jesus at his birth, so the light of God's presence began to shine through the life of Jesus in a new way at the time of his baptism. This was the strategic moment of transition from his living as an ordinary carpenter in Nazareth to becoming a public figure. His baptism was the catalyst initiating the 3-year physical and spiritual ministry of Jesus on this planet.

Luke tells us that after his baptism, Jesus was praying, and "the heaven was opened, and the Holy Spirit descended upon him in bodily form like a dove. And a voice came from heaven, 'You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.'" From his experience of baptism, Jesus KNEW, in his deepest core, that he was God's beloved child. He drew strength day by day from God's love empowering him, showing him how to love all the many kinds of people around him. He KNEW that no amount of criticism or injustice or violence could ever separate him from the Love of God or from his Spirit empowered calling to live the Love of God in all situations with all people. He KNEW his identity and his mission.

Often we forget that you and I and every person God created are also God's beloved children. We are not part of the Eternal Holy Trinity as Jesus is, yet we are baptized in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. The Trinity is also our primary family, our primal community. As the Bible tells us, our dignity and worth comes from the fact that God creates every human being in love, in the image and likeness of God. Our dignity and worth does not have to be earned and proved because we are perfect in all our words and deeds and beliefs, or from what other people say or think about us, in order to be loved by God. As a good parent loves their children, not because they are perfect, but simply because they are amazing beings created by God...so God our creator loves every person who is born, because they bear the DNA, the image of God. And our life mission is to live the calling of our divine family heritage in the power of the Holy Spirit by loving all God's children, all God's creation as God loves us. As long as we live, each of us, and every human being on the planet, has much more to learn about how to accept, to live out our identity, our dignity, our mission as God's beloved children.

The baptism of Jesus is an appropriate context for reflecting on the spiritual practices which sustained the life and ministry of God's beloved child, Desmond Tutu. While I have had the privilege of spending some significant time with Desmond, or the Arch, either of which he invited people to call him, I am not a long-term friend or an expert on his spiritual life. If you want to really get to know about his spiritual life, I recommend a new book by Michael Battle, **Desmond Tutu: A spiritual biography of South Africa's Confessor**.

I first learned about the spirituality of Desmond through his daughter, Mpho. In the early 1990's, her parish priest recommended that she talk with me as a spiritual advisor in a neighboring parish as she began exploring whether or not God was calling her to become ordained. In our monthly meetings I began to learn that her Tutu spirituality was different from the spirituality I had experienced.

American spirituality is often very individualistically focused on our private prayer and connection with God. Growing up in So Africa, her spiritual practice was very communal. She found her grounding connection with God through being part of her parish community. She grew up being in church constantly, not only for worship, but to just hang out with other Christians, both young and

older. They prayed and sang and danced and studied the Bible informally throughout the week and talked about their struggles in an apartheid society which constantly said they were not fully human and were not as smart or as worthy of respect as white folk. It was through Christian community that they found their dignity as God's beloved children and learned to love, not only each other, but also their white oppressors. As isolated individuals, they could not have found or sustained their identity in God's love and their mission to love all their neighbors, including enemies. Their communal connections were the spiritual practice which connected them to God and empowered them to live full lives in Christ in the midst of dehumanizing apartheid oppression.

This communal spirituality reflects St. Paul's description of the Church as the body of Christ where every limb and organ needs to be in continual relationship and interdependence with each other to be a healthy functioning body. It also finds roots in the Zulu, indigenous African concept of Ubuntu, which describes humanity as: "I am because we are", or "I am because you are." To be human is to be in relationships. So living in constant Christian community was a primary source of Tutu's and Black South African identity and spirituality. It was essential to survival and to faithful loving witness in that apartheid society.

And prayer was a constant part of everyday life for Tutu. I saw this when I met the Arch for the first time. By then I had been elected a bishop, and it was nearing the time when I would ordain Mpho Tutu as a Transitional Deacon. Desmond was to preach at her Ordination, so when he visited Mpho in the January before her ordination, he wanted to meet me and talk about the service. So I went to meet him at his daughters' home, where he greeted me warmly, with his usual joy. As we got into my car to drive to the restaurant for lunch, he put out his hand before I could start the car and asked, "Could we pray before we set out? In Africa we always pray as we get in our car and leave our homes, so please let me pray for a moment." Obviously prayer was a way of life for him.

Whenever he greeted people, he always lit up with a genuine smile of love and respect, curious to get to know another child of God. His bubbly, playful joy was especially evident when he talked with a little child as if this child was one of God's most special creations. His personal connections were prayer, recognizing and honoring with love the presence of God in each person.

I learned more about the spiritual practices of the Arch ten years ago, when we were privileged to have him and his son in law live with us in our home in Agawam, MA for five days. Rebecca had invited him because she learned that he had several preaching engagements in the area at that time. Since Desmond knew us and he and his family had been to our home when we hosted the reception after Mpho's Ordination, he was delighted to stay with us.

During his stay, he got up alone very early every morning to pray, meditate and intercede for the needs of people and nations around the world. Then he went out for a walk to pray in God's creation. (He got lost one morning on his walk and we were almost ready to get in the car to try and find him when at last he arrived.) At 8 am he always celebrated the Eucharist with us at our dining room table, pausing to reflect on the Scriptures assigned to be read that day. Then we had breakfast. Celebrating a daily Eucharist had been his practice as a priest in his parishes. In retirement he continued to celebrate Eucharist daily with another person wherever he was, in a home, even in an airport, so he could receive a fresh transfusion of the Word and Sacrament of Christ to sustain him. These daily practices and patterns helped to sustain his connection with God and his love of all people.

At my first lunch with Desmond, before his daughter's ordination, I learned that his connection with the government was also part of his spiritual practice. He was clear that he was a religious leader,

not a politician. He never joined a political party and, despite much criticism, he insisted that none of his priests should be members of any political party. However, he also said that politics and religion are woven together as one seamless cloth. What he meant by that was, the job of a government is to oversee the quality of life and relationships among the people of a nation. The job of religion is to be a moral compass to the government, identifying, speaking out about ways in which the government is or is not living up to the mutual respect and justice which is appropriate for all the beloved people God created.

Our meeting over lunch took place in the January before the United States invaded Afghanistan. Every day the American media was preparing the ground for the invasion in retaliation for 9/11. After some warm conversation, near the end of the meal, the Arch paused and asked, “Gordon, why aren’t you bishops speaking out against starting a war with Afghanistan?” As you can imagine, I felt stunned by his direct question. I felt as if I was being held accountable by Almighty God.

I told him that I and all the Episcopal Bishops had signed and sent a petition several months ago urging the President, the Congress and the Pentagon not to go to war with Afghanistan. And religious leaders from all stripes of Christian churches, except the Southern Baptists, and the leadership of Jewish, Muslim, Buddhist and Hindu communities had also spoken out against going into that war. But no major newspapers would print the story of this extraordinary religious consensus of opposition. In that moment of responding to Desmond’s question, I realized that I did not live in as free a country as I thought I did. I felt the censoring, silencing power of the American media.

I also experienced the political implications Desmond’s spiritual practice. He prayed and reflected on the Bible daily and he stayed in contact with the news of the world, constantly asking, in what ways are my government and governments all around the world not living up to the deep moral reality that every person on the planet is one of God’s beloved children deserving of respect and love. As a beloved child of God, he was called by the Holy Spirit to speak out whenever and wherever he saw any of God’s beloved children being disrespected and threatened.

One last note, Desmond was also sustained by being part of the Third Order Franciscans in the Anglican Communion. He certainly embodied the charism of the Order, to live with humility, love and joy and to spread the Spirit of Christ’s reconciling love and harmony. So I will close with the prayer of St. Francis. But before I do, I invite you to close your eyes and be still for a few moments to reflect on the spiritual practices of Desmond Tutu which sustained his identity and extraordinary life in God’s mission...

From what you have heard, what little changes might God be inviting you to make in your thinking and spiritual practices in this coming year?...

What changes might God be inviting us to make as a community here at Trinity so we can be more faithful to the identity and mission God gave us at our Baptism?...

“Lord, make us instruments of your peace. Where there is hatred, let us sow love; where there is injury, pardon; where there is discord, union; where there is doubt, faith; where there is despair hope, where there is darkness, light, where there is sadness, joy. Grant that we may not so much seek to be consoled as to console; to be understood as to understand; to be loved as to love. For it is in giving that we receive; it is in pardoning that we are pardoned; and it is in dying that we are born to eternal life. Amen.”