

## **Sermon**

### **St Peter's Brighton Beach**

#### **The Baptism of Our Lord**

**7 January 2024**

The Godfather is a 1972 American crime film directed by Francis Ford Coppola, and starring Marlon Brando and Al Pacino. For many it is the best movie of all time. The film chronicles the Corleone family, under patriarch Vito Corleone, played by Brando, between 1945 to 1955. At the centre of the film, we see the transformation of one of Vito's sons, Michael, played by Pacino, from reluctant family outsider, to ruthless criminal boss.

In a chilling baptism scene at the end of the movie, Michael is becoming the godfather to his sister's child. At the very same time, however, and as the climax to the movie, by assassinating his rivals to the underground crime world, Michael is becoming *the Godfather* to the Corleone family. The Don of the evil, organised crime racket of New York.

Within the baptism ceremony, a glorious, beautiful ceremony, an outward sign of an inward grace, the grace of the most High God himself coming down out of heaven, in fulfilment of the prophecy which we read here on the first Sunday of our reopening, at the beginning of Advent, 'O God that you would rend the heavens and come down' - Michael is there, in the church. At the very same as he is heard to say 'I renounce Satan and all his works', we are shown the ruthless massacre that he ordered, of the rival mob leaders. While renouncing Satan, for Michael there is no inward grace. Quite the opposite - inwardly, and secretly, he has embraced the world's evil. He has become evil. The evil that he was destined to become. Like Judas, a

murderer, who has lost his soul. As the most devastating thing about the Godfather is its credibility. Its normality. We have all seen evil play out in this world. We see it in the political order. Sadly, too often, we see it in the church.

Power corrupts. And absolutely power corrupts absolutely. Its power lies in its temptation. It draws one in. It becomes reality, wherever the spirit of the world, with its dark forces, its dark power games, is permitted to have dominion. It is temptation. Promising us life – a richer, fuller life – a brighter future. It delivers us into death. The wages of sin is death, the Apostle said.

Wednesday was the Feast Day of the Epiphany of our Lord. The Gospel of the day was the Magi's visit to the Christ child. The heroic quest, of the coming of the Gentiles, beyond the darkness of King Herod's schemings, into the light of Christmas. But what kind of leader, is Jesus going to be?

In stark contrast to the kingdoms of this world, here in the Christian Church, here in the reign of Christ – Christ the King, Christ the Good Shepherd – such worldly behaviour is prohibited. For in our baptism, each member of the church in fact has renounced Satan and all his works. In Christian baptism, each member of the church has turned away, from Satan and all his works. His works of malicious gossip. His works of hatred. And, as Jesus said, 'All who hate a brother or sister are murderers'.

In our baptism enter into Jesus Christ. In baptism we enter his church. In baptism we come as we are. But, as bishop Paul said to us last year, we must not stay as we are.

Turning to Christ, we reject Satan. Turning out of darkness to the marvellous light of Christ, we reject all that is evil. Gossip. Hatred. The corrupt pursuit or unauthorised exercise of power.

Today as we renew our baptismal vows, our annual New Year's Resolution, we undertake together to preserve together, as something that is of fundamental importance, beyond every human temptation, that the unity of the Christian community must never rest on merely human lordship, but on the lordship of God.

A lordship, a peace and justice, in the kingdom of God preserved, enforced, not by human hands, but by the two hands of God. Jesus Christ, the Lord, and the Head of his church. And the Holy Spirit. It is God himself, the Holy Trinity, who is the preserver, and the protector, of justice and peace, throughout the worldwide Christian Church.

With Christian baptism, we acknowledge, accept, and uphold, the all important and eternally valid distinction, between the reign of God himself, the Creator of the world, and ourselves, as mere creatures. We turn to Christ, we repent of our sins, we reject Satan and all that is evil.

As I conclude this morning with the words of George Beasley-Murray almost half a century ago in his landmark work, 'Baptism in the New Testament':

'Baptism takes place in the name of the Lord Jesus, not in the name of the church...[here in the Christian Church we are simply never] permitted to minimise the fact that there is a Redeemer and there are the redeemed, there is a Lord and there

are his servants, there is a King and there are his subjects, there is a Judge and there are those who are judged. And judgment begins at the house of God! In every symbol representing the relationship of Christ and his people, Christ dominates the scene. We must never be permitted to blur that priority.'

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