

*Listen, listen to me, and you will have good things to eat and rich food to enjoy. Pay attention, come to me; listen, and your soul will live.* Words from the prophet Isaiah in the first reading.

Moving from the sublime to the ridiculous, if you search our School website for *Hogwarts* or *Harry Potter*, a few search results appear. Such as the memories our School gave to a group of visiting primary school children recently. Clicking through the website, the Smythe staircases are declared to be *Hogwartian*. And our dining room is *Harry-Potter style*. You didn't return to school via platform nine-and-three-quarters from Kings Cross Station, although there used to be a steam engine named the Downside Express that did pass close by every term.

I think J.K.Rowling beautifully captures in her books both the ethos and life of a thriving school or society. In her stories are values that agree with our Benedictine and Catholic ones. The Hogwarts sorting hat, deciding which house each new boy or girl belongs to, is akin to our Benedictine value of concern for the individual. Every Hogwarts house from Gryffindor to Slytherin, Ravenclaw to Hufflepuff takes care of its members and fosters the *common good* helping everyone live in harmony. Same here, from Caverel to Barlow, Roberts to Isabella. In each place, the uniqueness of each individual must be cared for, educated and loved. There is a sense of solidarity in every house community of both schools.

In the Harry Potter stories, a battle is raging between good and evil, Lord Voldemort is fought and conquered over and over again. And a salvific figure is sent in the person of the title character, one H. Potter of Gryffindor house. A hero who was prepared to sacrifice himself for his friends in all seven books. In the story of Christian salvation, the Saviour of the World is written about as the main character in at least four volumes, Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. In fact, The Saviour of humankind, Jesus Christ is pointed to, and looked forward to in all 73 books of the bible.

So when Jesus appears in today's gospel, John the Baptist's prophecy is fulfilled. *Someone is following me* – said John the Baptist – *someone who is more powerful than I am. I have baptised you with water, but he will baptise you with the Holy Spirit.* And when Jesus was baptised by John in the river Jordan, the voice of God the Father spoke – only of love – for his begotten Son; and the Holy Spirit swooped down in the form of a dove. Onlookers saw a *theophany* that day, a theophany is when people see with their own eyes the fulness of God, who is Father, Son and Holy Spirit. At last, God's promise to triumph over and save his people from evil was fulfilled in their presence.

We often speak of Jesus as God's only Son. But today's Feast of the Baptism of the Lord is a celebration of how in Jesus, each one of us can become a son or daughter of God. That's how God

accomplishes his plan to save us from sin; the Holy Spirit returns you and me to his fatherly embrace through Jesus.

If or when you were baptised, or when you will be baptised in the future, at that moment you become a beloved son or daughter of God. Your sins are washed away. The priest or minister speaks your name and says: *I baptise you in the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit*. Before baptism, you were a muggle in the Hogwarts terminology. Your soul is marked out identifying you as a child of God, forever.

When someone is baptised, everybody smiles, with a few tears of joy shed too. It is as if those words of God the Father resonate and echo around the building, *this is my beloved son or daughter with whom I am well pleased* – as another soul is won for Christ.

J.K.Rowling, a baptised Christian, said in an interview said she believed in the existence of an immortal soul in each one of us. In the first book, Dumbledore says to Harry: *if there is one thing Voldemort cannot understand, it is love. He didn't realize that love as powerful as your mother's for you leaves its own mark. Not a scar, not a visible sign. But to have been loved so deeply, even though the person who loved us is gone, will give us some protection forever*.

The difference for Christians is that when the water of God's love is poured on us in Holy Baptism, we are not only transformed by Christ's love, but sustained in it forever. We're part of God's family now, and we will be provided for. Jesus is the same Lord, yesterday, today and for all time. At baptism, he brings us into his grace, and into the family of God, who is Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

OK, so Downside is a bit like Hogwarts. But there are no magic spells cast at Downside School, and witchcraft is discouraged. But sainthood is encouraged, and sacraments are celebrated, and God's powerful grace offered and given freely. You can ask to be baptised if you would like to become a Catholic. You can ask for confession, that provides the only remedy to restore our baptismal dignity. Holy Communion means Christ visits our body and soul; the most intimate and beautiful experience of God this side of heaven. Confirmation perfects and completes the baptismal grace we received at baptism. Many of you are coming forward to receive these sacraments in this year of Our Lord, 2024. All are welcome.

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