

And two great things happen for us on this last holy day of Christmas. First, water goes through a conversion. Water that had been so cruel to the human race in the great flood. Today Jesus enters the water, very much like Jesus enters your mouth at holy communion --- and the water ... changes. It becomes *the* benefactor of the human race, *the* sacramental, *the* primordial way our sins are washed away and we get grafted, welded, fused forever to the Savior. The great mosaic at St. Mark's in Venice shows Jesus putting his foot in the water, and simultaneously, all upstream and downstream, fish jump, animals frolic, vegetation flourishes. Catholics love water and are holy water people.

And something else happens, more important than the conversion of water. Today is when, for the first time, Jesus with his human will, accepts his mission, embraces his ministry, immerses himself in God's plan. And that right use of human freedom is so powerful that it accomplishes, immediately, what no other person could do. It opens heaven. The father approves, the dove coos, and, says the reading: Heaven was opened.

Heaven was opened. What had seemed an impossibility, or at least highly implausible, what many of the wise and clever dismissed as pure fantasy or wish projection --- heaven --- is real and ... furthermore ... it's open. The presidency of the United States may not be open to you. Harvard or Yale may not be open to you. Membership in an elegant club, worldwide fame, a million dollar mansion may not be open to you --- but heaven, glorious, glistening eternal heaven, is open.

If the door to heaven is open, the little doors down here that aren't open don't have to completely ruin your life. Get mad, kick the door and move on. If heaven is open, the sad goodbyes we say turn into hopeful: "Till we meet again." If heaven is open, we can give ourselves over to what's noble and true and good and loving in life, without reservation or too much worry about self-protection or whether it works right away.

And how open is heaven? Well, once there was a lady who dies and goes to the pearly gates. It looks so beautiful inside. "St. Peter, I want to get in." "Great. Almost everyone does. What have you done to earn heaven?" "Kindness (one point), weekly Mass (one point), prayer (one point), justice work (one point), tithing (one point). How many points do I need?" "For heaven, a trillion points." "Then how can anyone get in, except for the grace of Jesus Christ!" "Ah, the grace of Jesus Christ. That's a trillion points. Come on in. Heaven is open."