

Feast of the Baptism of Our Lord, January 09, 2017

Readings: Isaiah 42:1-4, 6-7 Acts 10:34-38 Matthew 3:13-17

The Baptism of Christ as recorded in all the four Gospels indicates the Trinitarian Revelation and the commencement of the public ministry of Jesus. John the Baptist, the cousin of Jesus and the person chosen by God to proclaim His coming, was preaching in the wilderness and was baptizing all those who would respond to his message of repentance. At the same time, John was directing the people toward the one who would baptize them with the Holy Spirit. The Scriptures tell us that Jesus came from Galilee to John at the River Jordan to be baptized by him. Initially, John refused to baptize him saying that it is Jesus who should baptize him. Jesus insists that it is John who has to perform the task and it is proper for them in this way to fulfil all righteousness and John consents. When Jesus comes out of water after his Baptism, the heavens open and the Holy Spirit descends upon Him in the form of a dove. There is also the voice of the Father that comes from the cloud, "This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased." In the first reading the prophet describes the character of God's servant. His kind ways will bring justice and peace to the world. In the second reading Peter tells in the house of Cornelius of the universality of the divine call and that God has no partiality towards any one. He anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and he went about doing his healing.

In the First Reading of today Prophet Isaiah speaks of the promised Messiah who is God's chosen Servant in Whom the Divine Soul would delight. God speaks in glowing terms of this servant, even announcing that the Servant is filled with God's Spirit. This servant goes about the mission in a way that distinguishes him from prophets who went about proclaiming the word of God in the streets and public places. The servant does not cry out or shout and he operates more by example than by words. He proceeds with kindness and mercy, nurturing those who retain the potential for new life. His ways are gentle and his aim is to transform the nations of the world, reaching even distant coastlands. God assures the servant the ultimate victory. Filled with the Spirit of God, the servant will bringing forth justice to all the nations, not just God's chosen people, meaning he will restore the nations of the world to a right relationship with God. He will give them new sight, free them from whatever holds them bound, and bring out into the light those who live in darkness of sin and ignorance. The transformation that would take place within those who heard the Word of God would be an inner transformation that is a change of heart. The Messiah would come to save the sinners, not those who are already saved. A dimly burning wick He would not

quench, says the prophet. The prophet tells us that there is always hope for the souls, when the grace of God is at work. In the end, the promised Messiah would faithfully bring forth justice, not a worldly justice but a spiritual one.

In the Second Reading, from the Acts of the Apostles, Peter in his sermon to Cornelius, a pagan official to be baptized and the first Gentile to be accepted into the fold by the Apostles, speaks of the beginning of the ministry of Jesus after the preaching and baptizing of John and characterizes this ministry as endowed by the Holy Spirit. John's baptism is mentioned only in passing, but it was an important episode in the proclamation of the kingdom of God. He specifies with the words that God had anointed him with the Holy Spirit and power and in this case, the anointing is by water rather than by oil. That anointing, of course, implies that Jesus is being made King and Lord. The title 'Christ' which is given to him means 'The Anointed One' and which means 'Messiah'. Finally, this scene is also a 'missioning' ceremony for Jesus as he embarks on his public life. However, the ministry of Jesus was exercised not only by the power of the spirit but also in the humility of the servant. Here Peter specifies that God shows no partiality towards any one. In every nation anyone who fears Him and does what is right is acceptable to Him. His salvation is universal and is extended to all since all are created by him and all are his children. He is generous and he does not hold back his graciousness from other people.

In the Gospel of today we heard the account of the Baptism of Jesus in the Jordan. It was a different Baptism from that which we all of us received as we became the members of the Catholic Church. Basically, the whole mystery of Christ in the world can be summed up in this term: "baptism", which in Greek means "immersion". The Son of God, who from eternity shares the fullness of life with the Father and the Holy Spirit, was "immersed" in our reality as sinners to make us share in his own life: he was incarnate, he was born like us, he grew up like us and, on reaching adulthood, manifested his mission which began precisely with the "baptism of conversion" administered by John the Baptist. The first public act of Jesus, as given by the Evangelist, was to go down into the Jordan, mingling among repentant sinners, in order to receive this baptism. John was naturally reluctant to baptize him, and indicates that it ought to be the other way around. But because this was the Father's will, Jesus insisted that he be baptized. Once he was baptized, there was the transformation that took place. Jesus became aware of his mission, the call of the Messiah. It was manifested to him by the spirit. The presence of his Father revealed it to him. From now on the Spirit will lead him to the desert, to public life and finally to his cross. Baptism was the starting point of his new mission given by his Father. What is happening here is that Jesus, as he stands

there in the River Jordan, is being 'commissioned' by his Father for the work he is just about to begin. He is here getting the total endorsement of his Father for that work.

The Evangelist today recounts that when Jesus came out of the waters at River Jordan, the Holy Spirit descended upon him in the form of a dove, while the Father's voice from Heaven proclaimed him "my beloved Son in whom I am well pleased". The dove is a symbol of many things. In the Jewish Scriptures it symbolizes peace and love. It is also a symbol of gentleness. In today's event, the dove is pre-eminently a symbol of the Holy Spirit, the third person of the Trinity who was present at the creation of the universe. This was the same Spirit of whom Isaiah had prophesied when he said the spirit would rest upon him. The implication is that Jesus specially endowed with the Holy Spirit is the creator of the new people of God. From that very moment, therefore, Jesus was revealed as the One who came to baptize humanity in the Holy Spirit and St John tells us that he came to give men and women life in abundance, eternal life. This gift of God brings every human person back to the divine life and heals him entirely, in body and in spirit, restoring him to the original plan for which he was created. The purpose of Christ's existence was precisely to give humanity God's life and his Spirit of love so that every person might be able to draw from this inexhaustible source of salvation. This is why St Paul wrote to the Romans that we were baptized into the death of Christ in order to have his same life as the Risen One. That is the reason why Christian parents bring their children to baptism, knowing that life which they have communicated calls for fullness, a salvation that God alone can give.

A voice from the heavens confirmed the scene. There are only three recorded times in the New Testament when the voice of the Heavenly Father has been heard by the world. This was the first time; then at Transfiguration and finally at the end of his Ministry when Jesus asks his father to glorify God's name. The first part of today's message is this is my beloved Son that is given in the second Psalm and also in today's first reading, which is the description of the Messiah. The second part of the message tells us that God is pleased with Jesus. The Heavenly Father has placed on his beloved servant the Spirit which is necessary for the redemptive work. The Father is the one who has chosen him and has sent him on the mission and the obligation of every individual is to listen to him and follow his dictates.

Special significance is to be seen in the fact that Jesus submitted to the baptism of John, which was a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. John through his preaching called a sinful and self-righteous people to turn quickly before an impending judgment descends. "Already the axe is laid to the root of the tree."

Matthew's narrative focuses on the issue, for in it the Baptist attempts to protest the inappropriateness of Jesus coming to be baptized. The baptism of Jesus marks his solidarity as the messianic servant with his people. He takes upon himself by this cultic act their condition and their predicament. He becomes their representative. Coming to them and speaking to them he takes his place with them. Incarnation is not only coming to earth but also assuming the burden of life in the flesh. He not only speaks to them but also speaks for them. The Father's Son becomes the intercessor to the Father. The significance of the baptism of Jesus is explained by Paul: "He who knew no sin became sin for us in order that in him we might become the righteousness of God"

However, in order to understand what is happening at the River Jordan, we have to go far beyond seeing Jesus' baptism as a matter of dealing with sinfulness. Baptism is not, as is true of all the sacraments, an isolated ritual. It takes place in the context of our whole life. Whether we are baptized as children or as adults, what primarily is happening is that we become incorporated embodied, into the Christian community. We become not passively, but actively member of the Body of Christ. It can never be something imposed on us against our will. That is why, for adults, there is now a long process of initiation leading up to Baptism and, hopefully a further process of community support after the Baptism has taken place. It is why adult Baptism is now celebrated in the presence of the whole parish community and at the Easter Vigil. Rather, if one becomes truly incorporated into a living Christian community, the sinful influences that pervade our world become reversed by our exposure to the vision of Jesus and the lived experience of a community based on love, justice and sharing. Let God our Father say of us as he said of Jesus: "This is my Beloved; in this one I am very well pleased."

While Baptizing the children in the Sistine Chapel Pope Benedict XVI said: Baptism is not only a word, it is not only something spiritual but also implies matter. All the realities of the earth are involved. Baptism does not only concern the soul. Human spirituality invests the totality of the person, body and soul. God's action in Jesus Christ is an action of universal efficacy. Christ took flesh and this continues in the sacraments in which matter is taken on and becomes part of the divine action. We can now ask precisely why water should be the sign of this totality. Water is the element of fertility. Without water there is no life. Thus, in all the great religions water is seen as the symbol of motherhood, of fruitfulness. For the Church Fathers, water became the symbol of the maternal womb of the Church.

In Baptism, the Heavenly Father says: "You are my child." Baptism is adoption and admission into God's family, into communion with the Father, the Son and the

Holy Spirit. For this very reason, Baptism should be administered in the Name of the Most Holy Trinity. These words are not merely a formula; they are reality.

The readings of today tell us that the Baptism of Jesus was a major turning point in His life. Prior to it, we know very little of His life between age twelve and thirty. Jesus' public life began with His Baptism of John the Baptist in the Jordan. John preached a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. Jesus submitted Himself entirely to His Father's will: out of love He consented to this baptism of death for the remission of our sins. Through Baptism the Christian is sacramentally assimilated to Jesus, who in His own baptism anticipates His death and resurrection. The Christian must enter into this mystery of humble repentance, to be raised with Him. Like Jesus we too have the manifestation and the mission and we have to make the choice for God. Let us accept the call and answer positively on the mission God has given us.

A hermit was meditating by a river when a young man interrupted him. "Master, I wish to become your disciple," said the man. "Why?" replied the hermit. The young man thought for a moment. "Because I want to find God." The master jumped up, grabbed him by the scruff of his neck, dragged him into the river, and plunged his head under water. After holding him there for a minute, with him kicking and struggling to free himself, the master finally pulled him up out of the river. The young man coughed up water and gasped to get his breath. When he eventually quieted down, the master spoke. "Tell me, what you wanted most of all when you were under water." "Air!" answered the man. "Very well," said the master. "Go home and come back to me when you want God as much as you just wanted air."

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