

Baptism of the Lord – January 08, 2018

Isaiah 55:1-11; 1 John 5:1-9; Mark 1:7-11

The feast of the Baptism of our Lord presents us with the Third Epiphany or the manifestation of our Lord, the first being the Nativity of our Lord and the second, the feast of the Magi. The Baptism of Jesus was the moment when he passed from the relative obscurity of village life in Nazareth onto the public stage of his mission of proclaiming the God's Kingdom. We are brought to the banks of the River Jordan somewhere north of Jerusalem where John the Baptist had begun his ministry. John the Baptist was preaching in the wilderness and was baptizing all those who would respond to his message of repentance. The purpose of his ministry of preaching and Baptism was to direct people toward Jesus who would baptize them with the Holy Spirit. The Scriptures tell us that Jesus came from Galilee to River Jordan to be baptized by John the Baptist. Jesus subjects himself to this simple act of repentance and is baptized by his own cousin. Baptism is meant as an acknowledgement of sin and Jesus was totally sinless. He had no need of repentance or forgiveness. Yet this was the beginning of his mission as was planned by his Father. The Baptism of Christ as recorded in all the four Gospels indicates the Trinitarian Revelation and the commencement of the public ministry of Jesus. When Jesus came 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."

The first reading of today from Prophet Isaiah summons the exiles to return to Jerusalem and go back to the life in God they had before the exile to Babylon. It is full of symbolic language which invites all those who are thirsty to come to the waters that supply the spiritual refreshment and renewal we all need. All are to come for wine and honey, symbols of abundance. No money is needed because all these things are beyond all price. They are price-less. The prophet asks why they have to spend their money for that which is not bread and their labour for that which does not satisfy them. The prophet may have referred to their worship of idols found in the pagan religion. Instead, they are called to eat what is good and delight themselves in rich food namely, the spiritual blessings from God in Scripture. The Prophet now calls the people to seek the Lord while he may be found, and call upon him while he is near. He admonishes the wicked to forsake their ways and return to the Lord because the God is filled with forgiveness and love. Towards the end of the passage Isaiah says that our human thoughts and

ways are not God's ways. The prophet asks people to set their minds on the flesh are death, but to set their minds on the Spirit is life and peace. The passage ends by saying that the Word of God is powerful and shall not return to God empty. Just as the rain and snow do not return to the skies without having watered and nourished the earth, so God's Word will not return without fulfilling its purpose. God's plans and God's designs cannot be frustrated.

If we use Isaiah 42:1-4, 6-7 for the first reading we have the word of God regarding the promised Messiah who is God's chosen Servant in Whom the Divine Soul would delight. God speaks with joy about this servant, announcing that he 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 public places. The servant proclaims the word of God 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 bring forth justice to all the nations, not just to God's chosen people, to 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. A dimly burning wick He would not quench and there is always hope 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 of today from the First Letter of John, we are told that those who believe that Jesus is the Christ, the promised Messiah, have been born of God. Those who love God the Father, they also love Jesus, the Son of God. We show that we belong to God's family when we believe in Jesus as the Christ and Son of God. Through our love for God and our obedience to His commandments, we show our love towards others who are also children of God. To shine in the love of God, we must obey His commandments. His commandments are not so difficult to obey because when we are born of God through the Sacrament of Baptism, we receive the grace of the Heavenly Father and the power of the Holy Spirit in the Most Holy Name of Jesus so we may overcome the worldly desires and pleasures. Our victory over the world is our living faith in Christ. Our living faith is manifested by our spiritual works that are signs of the indwelling Holy Spirit. Faith is a pure gift from God and a living faith is a sign of our relationship

with God. Jesus came into the world by water and Blood, meaning through his Baptism and through his death on the cross. He did not come by water alone but by the water and the Blood. In this way Jesus overcame the world and he now enables us to live as the children of God.

The opening words of today's Gospel tell us that John the Baptist was proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. It is important not to misunderstand the meaning of these words. It would be quite wrong to think that people simply had to come for baptism in the river for all their sins to be wiped out. That would be little more than superstition. The baptism itself was a symbolic act which had to be accompanied by an inner change. The word for 'repentance' here is *metanoia* in Greek, meaning a change of heart. It implies a radical change in the way we look at the meaning and purpose of life and how we live that life ourselves. It calls for much more than is connoted by 'repentance' which we normally understand as 'being sorry' for something we have done. *Metanoia* is much more than just feeling sorry. It calls for a total reorganization of one's attitudes so that such errant or hurting behavior would simply disappear from one's life. At the same time the 'forgiveness of sins' is more than just God just wiping out the guilt and the threat of punishment that our sins might involve. In a sense, our sins can never be wiped out. The damage they do often lasts for a very long time and cannot be undone. If I have pained someone badly, the hurt feelings remain and there are damages even when we feel sorry about it. Hurtful words spoken cannot be called back. If we have destroyed a person's reputation, the damage remains forever. Obviously, 'repentance' and 'forgiveness' in this sense bring people and God together and bring people and people together. That is what John was preaching and it is a message which Jesus, too, will preach during his public life.

It is very important in the gospel tradition to make clear that John the Baptist is in no way equal to Jesus. In the writing of Mark, John does not know who the Messiah is but he does know and states emphatically that it is not himself. In the Gospel narrative we heard the account of the Baptism of Jesus in the Jordan. John's Baptism was a Jewish ritual cleansing with water and instilling repentance for sin. This in fact was part of the preparation process for the advent of Messiah. The Messiah however will baptize not with water but with the Holy Spirit. Mark does not give an explanation of this nor does he show it being fulfilled. 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. The entire mystery shows that the Messiah will bring a new creation animated by the power of God.

Mark clearly shows with the Baptism of Jesus that he is the Messiah, the one for whom John served as a precursor. As John speaks, he tells the crowds that someone far more important is coming than John himself. This person is far more powerful and will do far greater things. He is so great that John is not worthy even to untie his sandals. This person too will proclaim a baptism but it will not be like his baptism with water but with water and the Spirit. When Jesus arrived at the River Jordan, 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. By being baptized by John, Jesus becomes fully identified with Israel and the people of God. With the descent of the Spirit in the form of a dove, the divine identity of Jesus is made manifest. In a real sense, Jesus is here anointed with the Holy Spirit for his divine mission and his ministry. 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 final confirmation of the divine identity of Jesus comes from a mysterious voice which can only be understood as the voice of God the Father. The Evangelist today recalls 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 that Jesus is God's beloved Son and that God is well pleased with him. Mark wants this affirmation to recall in the mind of the reader those very important Suffering Servant Songs of Isaiah. These will provide the

context within which Jesus will fulfill his Messianic calling as God's beloved Son. 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 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.

The dove mentioned by Mark is a symbol of many things. In the Jewish Scriptures it symbolizes peace and love. In the wisdom literature it is the symbol of gentleness. In today's context of Baptism 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 is 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.

In order to understand today's feast and what took place 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 and the life of the community. 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 celebrated in the presence of the whole

parish community and at the Easter Vigil. As today's readings tell us, the Sacrament of Baptism is insufficient to save us. We must live our faith in Christ by obeying the commandments of God. This is achieved by shining in our love towards others as lights in the world. This is why we are told by St. James that our Faith without works is dead. It is insufficient to have faith in Christ to be saved. To be saved, we must practice what we believe in, the teachings of Jesus Christ. Like Jesus we too have the manifestation and the mission and we have to make the choice for God. As we continue with the celebration of the Holy Mass, let us thank Jesus for having showed us the way to salvation that is obtained through His Blood. Let us always remember to call upon the indwelling Spirit who is our spiritual strength to overcome the desires and pleasures of this world.

A little Chinese girl about eight years old was a close observer of the Missionary priest of their village church. She used to watch him at his prayers in the church, listened closely to his teaching and preaching, and watched him as he went about visiting the sick or consoling those in sorrow and pain. She stopped with him and cheered people as he greeted them in the street. He always had a kind word, a smile, a little advice for the young and sometimes a sweet for the children. One day the girl went to the neighboring village. They were having catechism that day and the Sister was telling them of the man who was always kind, who helped the sick, cheered up those discouraged and sad, and who always went about doing well. Noticing the strange girl the Sister asked her if she knew who this Person was. The girl quickly replied: "He is the Missionary Father from our Village."

Fr. Eugene Lobo S.J. Bangalore, India