

Baptism of our Lord January 10, 2016

Isaiah 42:1-4, 6-7; Titus 2:11-14; 3:2-7; Luke 3:15-16, 21-22

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 baptism of Jesus at the hands of John the Baptist is recounted in some detail in Matthew, told more briefly in Mark, mentioned in detail in Luke, and unrecorded though probably presumed in John. In all four accounts the anointing of Jesus with the Spirit and the declaration of his sonship are directly linked to the baptism. Mark and Luke tell us only that Jesus was baptized in the Jordan by John, but Matthew adds that John the Baptist was hesitant and felt unworthy. Jesus, however, urges compliance with the call of God to "fulfil all righteousness." Mark suggests that Jesus was baptized during the ministry of John to all the people, while the structure of the text in Luke indicates that the baptism of Jesus by John was the culmination of John's ministry meaning that "after all the people had been baptized, then Jesus also was baptized. The Fourth Evangelist says only that John saw Jesus coming to him and then there follow certain Christological declarations by John. The fundamental feature of all the narratives is that on the occasion of his baptism Jesus is anointed with the Spirit and thus inaugurating the ministry of Jesus.

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 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 of Jesus going for Baptism and John 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"

The First Reading taken from the Book of Isaiah tells us that the promised Messiah would be God's chosen Servant in Whom the Divine Soul would delight. The Messiah would have the Spirit of God upon Him, bringing forth justice to all the nations, not just God's chosen people. This servant is filled with the Spirit of God and he goes about the mission in a way that distinguishes the servant from other prophets. As the Servant of God, the Messiah would not cry or lift up His voice or make it heard in the street. His mission would be modest and gentle in nature. He operates by his example and work and not by his word. The promised Messiah would not force the people to conform to His teaching. The transformation that would take place within those who heard the Word of God would be an inner one, a change of heart. He brings new life in them through his kindness and mercy. The Messiah would come to save the sinners, not those who are already saved. A dimly burning wick He would not quench. Faith says that there is always hope for souls when 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. God assures the servant of the victory. He will give sight to the blind, free the captives and free those who are bound. His mission is summed up with the word justice and he will restore all nations to the right relationship with God.

St Paul in the second reading tells us of our own Baptism and that it is a gift of the Father, Son and the Spirit. He reminds us that the Lord has come to give us salvation and he gives us through the sign of Baptism. Paul sees himself as the steward of God's grace. The mystery he received by revelation he has to hand over to others. He indicates two parts of the mystery. First of all the mystery

is God's plan of salvation in Christ. Secondly, it includes both Jews and gentiles. All are called to be members of the body of Christ. His emphasis is grace indicated by the words like kindness, generosity, love, mercy and all these justified by grace. He gives completeness or wholeness to all and to help us leave behind all "worldly passions", all those appetites and longings which are ultimately destructive and harmful to our proper destiny. Paul makes it clear that our baptism is linked with that of Jesus: "For when the goodness and loving kindness of God our Saviour appeared, he saved us, not because of any works of righteousness that we had done, but according to his mercy through the water of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit." The Word became flesh so that we could be liberated from the sinful inclinations of the flesh. His baptism provides the basis of our own baptism.

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 behaviour 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.

Luke refers to the baptism of Jesus by John but does not record the event. For Luke the history is divided into three parts. The first part is the time of Israel, the second is time of Jesus and the third is the time of the church. John belongs to the first part, Jesus to the second and he himself leads us to the

third by the baptism. Then the voice comes from heaven asking all to listen to the Son who will speak to us continuously. It also happens that at the baptism the spirit comes down and the Trinity meets. This is followed by the prayer and public ministry where he is led by the spirit.

Here we may ask why Jesus needed to be baptised. Most of those coming to John the Baptist were repentant sinners. It should be noted that Jesus did not get baptized because He needed to repent of His sins. Being God, He was without sin! He was baptized because from the moment of His birth to the moment when He began His ministry on earth, Jesus completely submitted Himself in obedience to the customs of His people. By submitting Himself to the Baptism of John the Baptist, He placed His seal of approval that we all need to repent of our sins. But there was more to it than could be perceived at that time. Jesus' example of being baptized was to tell us that the Sacrament of Baptism is the Way to the new life, to being born again of water and spirit.

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 fulfil 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.

Despite his dignity and rank as Son of God, as Messiah, Jesus never did require any external signs of privilege. When he got up in the synagogue of his home town and began to amaze people with his insight, his neighbours could not understand it. They had lived for years with him and had no idea of the divinity hidden in his person. Secondly, Luke says significantly that Jesus was at prayer when his baptism took place. They also hear the voice from heaven that he is the Beloved and God's favour rests on him. For Jesus it is a special moment when his mission becomes clear to him. It was the moment of discernment. In this special experience he knows what he has to do and what awaits him in the fulfilment of his call. So, through his baptism, Jesus is being officially commissioned to begin his public work of teaching, healing and liberating enslaved souls up to the climactic moment of his passion, death and resurrection. This feast of Baptism is an opportunity for all of us to reflect on our own baptism. Each one of us is called to be a living witness to the Gospel: to be the salt of the earth and light to the world.

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 a light in the world. 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 man stopped at a flower shop to order some flowers to be wired to his mother who lived two hundred miles away. As he got out of his car he noticed a young girl sitting on the curb sobbing. He asked her what was wrong and she replied, "I wanted to buy a red rose for my mother. But I only have seventy-five cents, and a rose costs two dollars." The man smiled and said, "Come on in with me.. I'll buy you a rose." He bought the little girl her rose and ordered his own mother's flowers. As they were leaving he offered the girl a ride home. She said, "Yes, please! You can take me to my mother." She directed him to a cemetery, where she placed the rose on a freshly dug grave. The man returned to the flower shop, cancelled the wire order, picked up a bouquet and drove the two hundred miles to his mother's house. Mother is always a blessing, motivation and inspiration to all those who are having mother. And my advice is to please respect and love her if she is with you then you are lucky and try to make her happy and smiling and take her blessing this is one of the best gift in this life and here after.

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