

Baptism of the Lord – Homily by Fr. Dan Donovan (Jan. 12, 2014)

John the Baptist stands at the beginning of the various accounts of the public life of Jesus. He comes out of the wilderness proclaiming the near approach of the kingdom or reign of God, challenging people to undergo a conversion of mind and heart in order to prepare for it. He invites them to be baptized by him in the river Jordan as a sign of their repentance.

The word **baptism** in the New Testament implies a **plunging or immersing** of someone or something under water; it suggests **cleansing and renewal**.

John's emphasis in his preaching on sin and forgiveness leads to the exchange between him and Jesus in today's gospel. Although not a sinner, Jesus submits to John's baptism as a sign of his willingness to fulfill all the requirements of the religious tradition into which he was born.

The important thing that takes place is not the baptism itself but rather what happens as Jesus comes up out of the water. The heavens are opened and the Spirit of God descends on him in the form of a dove, and a voice from heaven declares: "This is my Son, the Beloved with whom I am well pleased."

The event can be described as a **theophany, a manifestation of God**. In the Bible, such things tend to underline the importance of the vocation or mission to which the person who experiences such an event is being called. The most famous example before Jesus is the experience of Moses at the burning bush.

Today's first reading speaks of an analogous experience. It is one of several passages in the second part of the book of Isaiah about a servant of God, about someone called by God to be an instrument of God's saving activity. The gospel writers see in the vocation and mission of the servant a foreshadowing of the life and destiny of Jesus.

The first line of today's reading could easily be seen as pointing forward to the baptism of Jesus. "Here is my servant whom I uphold," the Lord declares, "my chosen, in whom my soul delights; I have put my spirit upon him; he will bring forth justice to the nations."

If the baptism of Jesus marks the beginning of his public ministry, it also has something to teach us about our baptism. The Gospel of Matthew, from which today's reading comes, ends with a solemn proclamation by the risen Christ: "Go," he says to the apostles, "and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit."

From the very beginning of Christianity, baptism was the ritual by which believers were brought into a life-giving relationship with Christ and became members the community of faith. The two things have always been understood to be inseparable, union with Christ and, in him, union with other believers in the church.

It was the apostle Paul who began the process of deepening our understanding of what baptism entails. During his lifetime, those who were baptized were overwhelmingly adults. The ritual involved the going down into running water, preferably a river or a stream. Paul saw in the ritual action a symbolic going down into the death of Christ. “We who have been baptized into Christ Jesus,” he says, “were baptized into this death so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead ... so too we might walk in newness of life.”

Here as elsewhere, Paul emphasizes the close connection between the death and the resurrection of Jesus. For him these are two sides of a single event through which God has reconciled the world to himself and poured out on us the gift of his Spirit. Baptism is the moment when all this is brought to bear on us as individuals.

A difficulty that many of us have in taking our baptism seriously flows from the fact that we were baptized as infants. The result is that we have no memory of it. We think of it as something that was done to us long ago, something in which we were in no way actively involved.

Infant baptism as practised by the church presupposes a strong sense of the ritual as a sacrament. In spite of our passivity, it has an effect on us. It seals us with the seal of Christ, brings us into the community of the church, plants in us the seed of the Spirit.

One way of thinking about what is involved in coming to spiritual and moral maturity as Christians is to see that process as a gradual becoming aware of and making our own, the reality that was begun in us in baptism.

Through being baptized into the death and resurrection of Jesus, we became one with him and, in him, children in a whole new way of God. We became part of that community of faith and love which Paul describes as the body of Christ. In it we receive the gift of the Spirit and with it the possibility of becoming genuine disciples of Jesus, called to live lives of goodness and fidelity, mercy and compassion, generosity and love. This is who we are by baptism and who, in the course of our lives, we are called ever more to become.