

THE BAPTISM OF THE LORD:

January 12, 2025

This feast of the Baptism brings a close to the liturgical season of Christmas. Since the beginning of Advent we have been reflecting and celebrating the coming of a Messiah, a redeemer, a prophet who teaches us what human life is really about. Now we will turn to the public life and teachings of Jesus in the weeks ahead. This baptism is a turning point in Jesus' life. He is verified by the voice of God and accepts a mission which will be a demanding one while enriching himself and others.

But the question that looms over this event is one that has confused followers from the beginning. John the Baptist preached a baptism of repentance. Jesus had taken some time to reflect on what his mission was to be. He will, in fact, begin by preaching, "Repent and believe the Good News." But if we claim that Jesus led a sinless life, we with many before us wonder why he deigns to be baptized as a sinner. And this, precisely, is why this event brings Christmas time to an end. The humanity of Jesus Christ is not a show. He takes on the full human story, its joys and sorrows, feastings and suffering. There is nothing human that he does not embrace, an important reality for us to realize as we open ourselves to the presence of Christ in all that we are and do.

Thus Jesus of Nazareth, this carpenter from Galilee, takes his place along all of sinful humanity. This baptism reveals that he was an ordinary and deeply religious man who had to grow and pray and seek the movement of the Spirit in his life and in the world around. He is the image of and the model of what human beings can be. That is quite something to digest.

But there is more to this Baptism scene than this. Jesus is baptized and then prays; he is in close harmony with God in prayer. Two things follow from this. First, Luke identifies the Holy Spirit, visible as a dove, descending upon Jesus. And a voice is heard, "You are my Son, the beloved; with you I am well pleased." This is a confirmation, a validation of Jesus. Whatever has been going on in Jesus' heart and mind for the past thirty years is now brought to a focus. These words from heaven are, no doubt, nice to hear. But the second reality here is that Jesus is now sent on a mission, to preach the good news of the kingdom of God to the people. And this won't be easy.

So how do we deal with this story? Do we simply admire Jesus and, because of our belief in his divinity, adore him? That's how we Christians often react to Jesus.

We adore him but do not seriously ask ourselves what it means to follow him. This baptism scene, however, is the template of our own baptism. We are imperfect, sinful human beings who, in this Eucharist, renew our baptismal covenant with our God.

Okay, it is time to be more proactive. May I ask all of you to stand? Now turn towards the person next to you or find someone to share this experience. You might want to place your hand on this person's shoulder if that is okay with the person. The Holy Spirit descends upon us. Do you feel that Spirit? Please repeat after me the words that God speaks to Jesus and to each of us. "You are my son (or daughter), the Beloved/ with you I am well pleased." Let us sit and take a moment of silence to absorb this. Do you believe; do you really know that God loves you and you are the beloved? This is no play-acting. This is real. Let's stop all this guilt and feelings of unworthiness. Being sinful and imperfect, still growing, is how we are beloved; we are not the beloved because we are perfect.

On Christmas Eve Pope Francis inaugurated the Holy Year which takes place every 25 years. It is a year of jubilee, of reconciliation. The Pope asks us to be pilgrims of hope. Get over the despair, the fears, the worries. You are loved, you are chosen, you are sent to bring good news to others. Be joyful, be faithful, be people of hope.

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