

The Baptism of the Lord – Year C (Jan. 11, 2004)

Some people might consider today's feast a puzzle. For instance, did you ever wonder just why Jesus presented himself before John to be baptized? After all, the baptism of John was a baptism of repentance. John was calling the people to conversion, to turn away from sin or whatever stood between them and God, and to turn to God. Does it make sense to think that Jesus needed conversion? Certainly not to turn away from sin. While we understand that he was like us in all things, still the one difference between him and us was that he was sinless. So why does he do this?

Interestingly enough the evangelists themselves seem to feel a bit ill at ease with the notion that Jesus came to be baptized by John. Indeed Matthew in his Gospel has John protest that Jesus should baptize him rather than the other way around. Luke relegates it to a dependent clause and the fourth Gospel is so embarrassed by the thought of Jesus being baptized that it doesn't mention it at all, but rushes on like the others to tell us that the Spirit descended upon Jesus in the form of a dove.

So, what is going on here?

Well, my own particular spin on the story of Jesus' baptism is that it tells us something about Jesus and it tells us something about ourselves.

What does it tell us about Jesus? Jesus takes his place in line with sinners. He identifies with sinful humanity. He is really and truly one of us. He belongs to a people, first of all, his immediate community, the people of Israel, a people whose history has been full of stories about good people and bad people, about saints and sinners, and Jesus wants to let us know that he is one of them, but Matthew, Mark and Luke tell us about this incident because uncomfortable as they might be with the notion of Jesus being baptized with a baptism of repentance for sin, still they want us to know that Jesus identifies with all people, with the rest of the world, with us as well.

Luke tells us that after the baptism Jesus is by himself, praying. Luke is the only one who gives us this detail. Indeed Luke has more about Jesus at prayer than any of the other evangelists. But it's while he is praying that

the voice comes from heaven saying, “You are my beloved Son. With you I am well pleased.” Now this tells us something about Jesus, too. The voice from heaven, the voice of God the Father, sends us right back to the first reading we heard today: the prophet Isaiah who tells us about the servant whom God calls “my chosen one with whom I am well pleased.” In other words Luke identifies Jesus as the servant Isaiah spoke about centuries before, a servant who would suffer and in this way would save the people, all of the people.

So what do we learn about Jesus from his baptism? Jesus is incorporated into a community, a people, a family, the human family, a family that includes all of us as well. *AND* he receives an identity, he is the servant of the Lord, the suffering servant with whom God is well pleased.

And what about us? In our baptism the same thing happens. We become part of a family, a people, a community, a church. And we receive an identity, not just the name that is given to us, but besides that, we are called Christians. And both of those facts carry with them a certain responsibility. Our call to be Christians, our initiation in baptism carries with it a consecration, a sacredness before the Lord. We all bear in our very persons the touch of the Holy Spirit, the same Spirit that appeared over Jesus in the form of a dove. With that touch the Spirit gives us a great gift. We are filled with the grace of God and we are made a holy people. A holy people! Did you realize that by virtue of your baptism you are already holy? Most people think they spend their lives trying to become holy. Little do they understand that they are already holy. All they have to do is accept that gift from God and live its implications because along with that gift comes the responsibility to be another Christ, to be Christ for one another and for the world we live in.

Our consecration as Christians, our Christian life is not restricted to church. The servant was missioned – as Jesus was – to spend his life doing good for others. And so are we. We, too, are missioned as servants, sent to the neighborhood, to the workplace, to the town or the city. We are called to bring a deep commitment to Christian values to a society that no longer seems to respect those values. This mission is not limited to priests or religious. It springs from baptism and is reinforced in confirmation. It is a call that touches all of us.

We must carry on the mission of Christ because by our baptism we are the Body of Christ. The wonderful thing about that is that we're not alone in the struggle to see that Christ's values somehow prevail, to see to it that the homeless are housed and the hungry are fed and the weak and poor of our society have adequate means to live a decent life.

In Luke's Gospel Jesus often betakes himself to prayer. There in silent communion with the Father, in his humanity he finds the strength and courage to do the Father's will.

We would do well to follow his example, and I am certain that if we do it with generous and loving hearts, for us, too, the heavens would open and we, too, would hear our God say to each and every one of us "You are my son, you are my daughter whom I love very, very much. With you I am well pleased."