

**Baptism of the Lord – Year A  
(Jan. 9, 2005)**

**Beloved of God**

Have you ever noticed how our liturgy sometimes does strange things with time? Here we just celebrated the birth of Jesus a couple of weeks ago and today we fast-forward about thirty years to celebrate his baptism. This could seem a bit disconcerting. That very idea occurred to some of the Fathers of the Church and so they hastened to explain how fitting it was to celebrate Jesus' baptism so close to the celebration of his birth. At Christmas, they said, he was born as one of us. Today he is reborn sacramentally. Then he was born of the Virgin; today he is born in mystery. When he was born as one of us his mother, Mary, held him close to her heart; when he is born in mystery, God the Father embraces him when God the Father says, "This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased." The mother caresses the tender baby on her lap; the Father serves the Son by his loving testimony. The mother holds the child for the Magi to adore; the Father reveals that his Son is to be worshipped by all nations.

Thus far, the Fathers of the Church.

Our Liturgy today is a big help with this mystery. The words God speaks in the Gospel take us right back to our first reading from the prophet Isaiah. God is telling us that Jesus who is his Son is also the servant that the prophet talks about, a servant who will deal with people, not harshly, not arrogantly, but gently, with kindness, love and compassion, something that the world of Isaiah needed, something that the world of Jesus needed, something that our own world needs so very, very badly. Along with the words of Isaiah identifying Jesus as servant, we hear Peter in the second reading telling us that this was also an anointing with the Holy Spirit and with power. In other words, Jesus is not only servant, he is also the anointed one, the Messiah, the Savior who is Christ the Lord.

John the Baptist, we are told, has a problem with Jesus coming to him, presenting himself as a sinner for the baptism of repentance. The early church had the same problem and had to wrestle with it. Matthew, our evangelist today, solves the problem by having Jesus tell John to let it

happen, “for thus it is fitting for us to fulfill all righteousness.” That simply means that this is what God wanted them to do – and so they should do it. Again, some of the early Christian writers say that he is giving us an example of humility and obedience.

And all of that, of course, is true, I’m sure. And maybe I should stop right now while I am ahead and let you contemplate in silent awe the wonder of this mystery. But instead I am going to plough on and attempt to break open still more the word of God that is given to us this morning in our Gospel.

Jesus, the anointed, the Messiah, the Christ of God, takes his place in line with sinful people who are coming to John to repent their sins. With this simple gesture it seems to me that what Jesus is doing is identifying with sinful humanity. He is making a public proclamation of what the Incarnation is all about: the embeddedness of the Word of God in this flesh and blood and bone of ours, that he is truly what we are and that from this time forward, almighty God will experience in the person of this beloved Son everything that it means to be human: our tears, our laughter, our sweat, our pain, our pleasure – and ultimately our death, that weakest and most vulnerable moment of our lives.

And this is perhaps another reason why we celebrate this feast so close to Christmas. It simply continues to let us know what it meant for the Son of God to become one of us. It seems to me quite fitting that we finish the Christmas season with a feast that makes the whole season actual in our lives. What would the life of Christ mean if it were simply a drama inaccessible to us? In a very real sense our own baptism is the most graced moment of our lives. It joins us to what Jesus was doing at his own baptism.

The common element at Jesus’ baptism and our baptism was water. We say that this water cleanses us and gives us new life and indeed, even apart from the sacrament of baptism, water is necessary for life. Life comes from water. Life is sustained by water. Without it we could not exist. But over the past two weeks we have been only too painfully aware that water can also bring death and destruction. As we continue to pray for the people devastated by the tsunamis in South-East Asia we can only hope that the massive amount of aid and compassion that the whole world has

poured out for them will help them also to experience new life as they face a future that is full of insecurity and uncertainty. May the Jesus whose baptism we celebrate today be with them in their time of need.

I like to think that what Jesus did at his baptism was get involved. Before that he was hidden. No one knew who he was. He was safe, secure. But the moment he stepped out into the open, he got involved. And when God saw his Son step out, God was so excited that God could not keep the divine mouth shut. God shouted through all the heavens and the sky, "This is my beloved Son. Here he is, watch him, listen to him." It's almost as though God is saying, "All right, Son, you want to get involved? I'll make sure you get involved by telling them all who you are.'

Well, what was Jesus' reaction? He fled to the desert and there he prayed. He prayed for strength and courage to do what the Father was asking him to do as servant and Messiah. And then he came back. And before he knew what was happening he found out what it meant to be involved. Everybody was after him. People did not leave him alone anymore. His kindness, his compassion, kept him on the move, kept him busy, opening the eyes of the blind, making the lame walk, healing the broken-hearted, and, most of all, preaching good news to the poor. He got tired, very tired, and eventually, he died on a cross.

And it all started when he stepped out into the crowd. When he joined the line of sinners. It was a deliberate decision to get involved, to rub shoulders with all the others, to be with the crowd. To be with sinners, to be with everybody.

Well, what about us? For most us our baptism was not a deliberate effort on our part. Others brought us to it. But have we ever reflected that this sacrament that made us Christians also involved us in the life of the Church in much the same way that Jesus was involved in the life of his people? Our involvement will not be the same, but involved we must be. Else our baptism is meaningless. It's up to each of us to decide what that involvement will be. Let's pray about that during a few moments of silence and let's listen carefully. Perhaps we will hear the voice of God saying to us, "You are my beloved child. In you I am well pleased."