

The Baptism of the Lord

1.13.19

Have you had enough of the holidays? Many of us, I think, would probably say yes to that question. Enough of all the decorations, no matter how beautiful they are. Time to get rid of the tree. Time to go back to ordinary living. After all, if we did not have ordinary times, we could not have extraordinary times, holidays. We need the one to distinguish the other. If every day were a holiday, holidays would cease to be holidays.

The liturgical calendar of the church is in sync with this thinking. Today's celebration of the Lord's baptism marks the end of the Christmas season and the beginning of ordinary time in the liturgical year. This change makes sense, for in the Christmas season we celebrated the Lord's birth and events connected with it, but now we move forward to the beginning of the Lord's public career. He is now about thirty and presents himself to John the Baptist to be baptized.

But this way of beginning his public career, this presenting himself for baptism, has always raised questions. Baptism implies a new beginning in a person's life, which normally consists of a turning

away from a sinful past to a future which will attempt to be free of sin. So what we call a conversion. But everyone agrees that the Lord did not have to undergo a conversion. Why then did he present himself for baptism? This fact caused trouble even for the writers of the Gospels. For example, in the earliest gospels, Mark and Matthew, John the Baptist baptized the Lord, but in the later Gospels, Luke and John, this action is downplayed or even left out. For example, in today's Gospel from Luke we read: "After all the people had been baptized and Jesus also had been baptized and was praying, heaven was opened and the Holy Spirit descended upon him in bodily form..." So Jesus' baptism is an "also ran" in Luke's account, the matter of an adverbial clause, with no explicit mention of who did the baptizing. And in John's Gospel there is no baptism of Jesus by John at all. It may be implied, but even that is not certain.

Much of the material given to us in the Gospels can be visualized. They give us scenes from the Lord's life which we can see and hear. That is certainly true of the Lord's baptism. We can imagine him, a young man of 30, making his way into the Jordan River, submerging himself in its waters, and then walking out of it. All three accounts tell us that as he came out of the water the heavens were opened and the Spirit of God came upon him in the shape of a

dove and a voice from heaven said: “You are my beloved Son with whom I am well pleased.”

Given this scene, could we not say the following: the fact that Jesus submits to this rite means that he identifies himself with every other person who submits to this rite and its meaning, which is a recognition of sin in one’s life and a turning away from it. Here in this action Jesus joins the sinful human race. He lets himself be numbered among its members and therefore shares in its sinfulness. But the heavenly reaction to his action tells us that he is different, for God himself now testifies to his sinless state by claiming him as his son, as the one in whom he is well pleased.

Do we not say that there is no such thing as compassion at a distance? If we are truly moved by other people’s suffering, we move close to them. We don’t turn away and walk on the other side of the street as the priests do in Jesus’ parable of the Good Samaritan. No, like the Good Samaritan, we cross the street to see why the person is lying there and then we try to help. Therefore, could we not say that the Lord’s submitting of himself to the rite of baptism was his way of acting out the parable of the Good Samaritan which he will later use in his preaching. He anticipates this parable by allowing himself to be baptized.

What a beautiful understanding of God the Lord's baptism gives us. Here we see that God, in his son Jesus, comes to our rescue because he is moved by our helplessness. That is the Good News, that is the Gospel which we attempt to live and preach in our world. God cares for us. God identifies with us even in our sinfulness.

If we attempted to apply this understanding of our faith to our situation today, what would we think and say? Not surprisingly, given the fact that we all have different understandings of the world's problems, we might find that we do not always agree even among ourselves about what the Christ-like response should be. But if we go back to the basics, if we look again at the beginning point of our views, perhaps we can begin to move a little closer in our solutions. If we can agree that the follower of Jesus must be compassionate to all people, then we could begin on the same page. If we were also to agree that this compassion must be exercised especially for those in the most difficult situations, then we might move a little closer to each other in our views of what should be done. And if we should notice that our compassion is really not universal, that it does not extend to those who are very different from us in race or speech or color of skin, then we would realize that we are in need of conversion, that we are not beginning

where the Lord would begin, that we are not accepting the principles which Peter gives us in our second reading today when he says: “In truth, I see that God shows no partiality, Rather, in every nation whoever fears him and acts uprightly is acceptable to him.”

We stand at the beginning of a new year. Let us imagine it as the time of our baptism. Let us hope that as we walk out of the waters, we may hear God’s voice saying to us, in anticipation of our actions, “This is my beloved child in whom I am well pleased.”