

## Baptism of the Lord

We end the Christmas Season on this coming Monday, the 13<sup>th</sup>. So we have advanced from celebrating the Lord's birth, and all that led up to it, to his appearance to the Magi, last Sunday's feast of the Epiphany, to today's feast of the Lord's baptism by John the Baptist. By now—if we are thinking chronologically—Jesus has grown up. The one whom JB ducks under the water of the Jordan is no child. He is a young man, a 30 year old, we usually imagine, who is about to begin his public life.

Have you ever noticed that there seems to be no way of talking about the Lord without first talking about John the Baptist. I had at first thought to myself that if I just stuck to Mark's Gospel which, unlike Matthew and Luke's gospels, does not have any accounts of the Lord's birth or childhood but simply begins with Jesus as an adult, I would not have to meet up with JB, but I was wrong. This oldest Gospel, Mark's, begins with a quote from the prophet Isaiah who is talking about someone who will come to prepare the Lord's way, and Mark understands this quote as a reference to John the Baptist. For, having given the quote, Mark begins immediately to speak of John the Baptist, and we are off and running. He proceeds immediately to speak of John's baptizing the Lord.

No, we cannot talk about Jesus without first talking about JB, and the later gospels, unless they wish to contradict Mark, the first Gospel, will have to portray the relationship between the two men as something positive. Of course we can wonder to ourselves what it was actually like. For if JB preached first and drew followers, and then Jesus did the same, John's followers must have needed much instruction in order to understand the new preacher, Jesus, and his relationship to the one they followed. And we have hints of this difficult situation in the gospels. But in the end JB adheres to his role as preparer. He must decrease so that the other may increase. And if we take the Gospels literally, Herod solves the problem for JB's followers by killing him. There is no alternative now. Jesus alone remains.

But what does that have to do with today's feast? Well, it tells us that we must now focus on this Jesus alone. And that is exactly what Christianity has done. If we want to express this exclusive concentration on Jesus in an image, we can use today's gospel as that image. John the Baptist baptizes Jesus, and then Jesus walks out of the water onto the bank, while John remains in the water. But the camera focuses on Jesus and follows him walking away.

Eventually we can no longer see the river or John in it. All we can now see is Jesus walking away.

But now we could ask: “Are we in danger if we concentrate on one person?” The answer to that question depends on the kind of person we follow. If he is a Hitler, yes, we are in danger. We will do inhuman things in his name. But Jesus won’t make us narrower; Jesus will open us up and make us bigger. What does he take from his own tradition to give to us? He takes the notion of justice. He takes the image of the ideal leader which Isaiah describes, the ideal leader who sees himself as the servant of God and brings forth the victory of justice, a victory symbolized in the image of prisoners emerging from dark dungeons into the light.

What does Jesus teach Peter, who was so careful in keeping a kosher diet and in refusing to enter the homes of Gentiles? He brings him to the home of a Gentile named Cornelius and there has him experience the very Spirit of God falling on these Gentiles. And so Peter has no choice but to baptize them. As Peter himself tells us: “In truth I see that God shows no partiality. Rather, in every nation whoever fears him and acts uprightly is acceptable to him.”

We celebrate the baptism of the Lord. We ourselves have been baptized in his name, and we have had our children and our grandchildren baptized in his name. But now we must learn what this means. Can anyone help us in this effort? Our pope can. He is a much traveled pope, despite his age and his sciatica. But where does he go? Oh yes, he has come to visit us and to other powerful nations. But I suspect that if we took track of his itineraries, we would find that he has been going to strange places which we have never even heard of. Why is he doing that? Because he believes that that is what Jesus would do. He is concentrating on the people who are on the periphery, not the center, of the world's attention. A doctor goes to the sick, not the healthy. The whole world is sick, but some areas of the world are sicker than others. And so the pope, representing the great doctor, the great healer, is turning his and out attention to those areas. This past fall bishops met in Rome to discuss the problems which they face in their diocese. They met in Rome, but they were reporting there on what they had learned in meetings at home in their dioceses in the Amazon part of South America. We should not be surprised. When did we not know that we should take care of the needy, even if they live in distant lands? But the pope is teaching us this old lesson in new ways. Let us be open and docile so that we walk with the newly baptized Lord towards those who are calling out for our attention.