

THE BAPTISM OF THE LORD

Gospel: Luke 3:15-16, 21-22

As the people were filled with expectation, and all were questioning in their hearts concerning John, whether he might be the Messiah, John answered all of them by saying, "I baptize you with water; but one who is more powerful than I is coming; I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire."

Now when all the people were baptized, and when Jesus also had been baptized and was praying, the heaven was opened, and the Holy Spirit descended upon him in bodily form like a dove. And a voice came from heaven, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased."

REFLECTION 1: THE GIFT OF BAPTISM

The baptism of Jesus is a wonderful feast, in the simple words of Luke's Gospel we see the Christ who was promised, praying in the waters of the Jordan river when the heavens opened to reveal Jesus as part of the Trinity with him the voice of the father and the descending spirit uniting them all in love.

At first glance, the scene makes little sense. People of all shapes and sizes flocked to John in the water. They are baptized in the Jordan as a sign of repentance and cleansing. Suddenly, out of the crowd steps John's cousin, Jesus. Wait a minute. What's Jesus, the sinless one, doing in a crowd of repenting sinners? What's He doing coming forward to be baptized by John, who is by his own admission, inferior to his cousin? Jesus does not enter the water to be sanctified. No he enters the water to sanctify. He empowers the water to become no longer just an outward sign, but a vehicle of the Holy Spirit bringing inner cleansing, rebirth, and transformation. Here Jesus institutes the sacrament of Christian baptism, something essentially different and greater than the baptism of John, which foreshadowed it.

Jesus's baptism was literally a watershed in his life. From it all his mission flowed, until that day when the veil of the Temple rent in two as he gave his life up for us on the Cross and rising from death revealed the Resurrection. It is the prototype of our baptism, in The waters of the font we die to sin and receive the life of Christ, we truly become Children of God and, anointed with Holy Chrism, receive the life giving Spirit.

Immediately after coming out of the water, the spirit descends upon him in the form of a dove. Now another Sacrament is instituted by Christ, the sacrament of confirmation. In confirmation we receive our own mission and the power to carry it out. For being a "Christian" is not about just "being saved". It's about sharing in Christ's anointing to transform the world. The mission is an essential part of the package, not an option. That's why we are called "Christians" or anointed one. It is not just priests and religious who are supposed to make it happen. Every single one of us is called and anointed. And that's why confirmation, together with Baptism and First Holy Communion, is one of the essential sacraments of initiation.

The question for those of us who have received these power-packed sacraments is this - what are we going to do with them?

REFLECTION 2: REVISTING OUR BAPTISM

Most of us who were baptised as infants cannot remember the moment of our baptism. Fortunately, we have an abundance of symbols and rituals to anchor us in our 'baptismal memory'. When we pass by the baptismal font in our Church we can 'remember' our baptism. Anytime we have the pleasure of being in the congregation at a baptism ceremony we can 'remember' our baptism. We can look at photographs or take out the family christening gown or baptismal candle to have a visual reminder of

our initiation into the Christian faith. But most significantly whenever we turn to one of the Gospel passages that tell the story of Jesus' baptism we can 'remember' our baptism in an especially powerful way.

Jesus comes to the Jordan, is baptised by John and everything changes. The sky breaks open. The spirit comes, announcing the fulfilment of the prophetic promise for which the people of Israel were waiting. And when we are baptised the same thing happens – the spirit comes down and makes itself known, claiming us as children of God and calling us to anchor ourselves in God's love.

The fact of our baptism ought to have continuing significance and impact upon our lives. It ought to be a continual source of strength and comfort. Baptism isn't just a one-off event but an ongoing reality. We have a new identity in Christ. Every day we are to live out the meaning of our baptism. To say 'I belong to God' is to find new strength to meet the difficult situations life presents us with. To remember our baptism is to gain a new sense of personal responsibility for our lives - we are accountable to God for the life we live.

The simple act of entering a Catholic Church and blessing ourselves with water from the font at the entrance is a way of remembering our baptismal commitment - in the name of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. We remember who we are as we enter God's presence. And it makes even more sense to put water on our foreheads as we leave the Church and go out into the world – for there the battles are fought. This is a month in which many of us are feeling overwhelmed. In January, the holidays are over and the bills are looming. Some people are dealing with a variety of post-holiday emotions; others already feel that they have failed in their new year's resolutions. The message of Jesus' baptism and a reminder of our own is needed at a time such as this: "Lord we are yours, help us to know it, To know it in the depth of our hearts and to act accordingly, Through Christ our Lord. Amen'.