

BAPTISM OF THE LORD

JANUARY 11, 2020

The Baptism of Jesus by John in the Jordan appears in all four gospels. Each gospel has its own particular emphasis. Matthew's version, which we read today, alone has the dialogue between John and Jesus. It is aimed at dispelling any thoughts which would put Jesus as inferior to John as some of John's disciples might have thought. Matthew also has the voice of God saying to all present, "This is my beloved Son," while Mark and Luke has the voice speaking to Jesus, "You are my son."

The church in the East emphasizes the Baptism of Jesus as the center of the Epiphany, not the coming of the Magi. And baptism is an epiphany. The fact that Jesus accepts baptism from John turns out to be the first revelation of how Jesus presented himself as Emanuel: an unimaginable, exceptionally humble, incarnation of God in the midst of humanity. Jesus' baptism reinforces the message of the Christmas narratives. It means that God's chosen way of being with us is not as an awesome ruler of the universe, showing power and domination, but as one who chooses solidarity with us in all our weakness and even associates with us in our sinfulness.

After thirty years as an obscure carpenter, Jesus has come to the realization that now is the time to fulfill God's design for him. He has come to the awareness that he was to be the servant of God as Isaiah had prophesized. Perhaps this event shook him for he withdraws to forty days of isolation in the desert to face the Spirit of God calling him forth. Then, finally, he will embrace a public ministry of love and compassion.

The scandal of Christianity is God's limitless solidarity with us. Emmanuel is "God with us." In every circumstance: in hope and love, in weakness and sin, disgrace and desperation.

What does this say to us who have been baptized in the name of Christ? It says that the union with God necessarily passes through practicing the kind of presence Jesus showed us. If we wish to know God, we can only do so through solidarity, through sharing one another's needs and weakness so profoundly that we can also genuinely share one another's joys. Then we will know God because God will be acting in us and through us.

Catholicism has been a way of life reinforced in the past by ethnic, national and family associations. We imbibed Catholicism from weekly Sunday Mass, abstention from meat on Friday, observing holy days, living the liturgical year with Jesus, as well as adjunct devotions, novenas, and practices. We absorbed a Catholic way of seeing the world. The Catholic imagination is a sacramental imagination that recognizes the sacred in the ordinary and material, the divine in the human.

Many of our children have not absorbed this worldview, and our own faith in them has weakened due to the scandals of the institutional church but also because of the secular society which now overwhelms us.

If Christianity itself is to endure, it must center on Jesus Christ and our union with him in baptism, with him and with the community as disciples of Christ. Only a strong faith in Jesus, in knowing and praying with him and through him. Prayer is necessary to undergird our faith in the sacraments and the community. Knowledge of the scriptures, both the Hebrews scriptures and the New Testament, forms in us that mind which was in Jesus Christ.

A few centuries ago, the Russian novelist, Fyodor Dostoyevsky, warned Christians of the crisis that would come if there was not a strong personal faith and following of Jesus. In a story within a story, "The Grand Inquisitor" was a part of his masterpiece, "The Brothers Karamazov." In that tale Jesus returns to earth during the days of the Inquisition, when religious leaders were controlling, imprisoning, and killing their fellow Christians and Jews, all in the name of Christ. It was evangelism by persecution.

The unwelcome return of Jesus results in his arrest, and the Grand Inquisitor himself comes down to Jesus' cell to confront him. He explains that the church of that time had been able to keep the people in line and therefore create an organized and complacent society. Everything is working perfectly, he argues, without allowing the people free will with all its messiness. If Jesus were to be freed, all he would do is mess things up! Throughout the encounter Jesus says nothing, but simply responds with the kiss of peace.

Religion has often been coopted by the state, as well as by religious authorities, to maintain good order. Religion has been a tool of nationalism, patriotism, and of a church that indulges in power and control. It is all coming apart. A far richer Christianity challenges us to leave behind passivity, routine practices.

As we renew our own baptism, may we be aware of our oneness with Jesus, of our dignity and our call. Each of us is addressed by God, "This is my beloved son or daughter, with whom I am well pleased."

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