

Baptism of the Lord 2008

Matthew 3:13-17

A week after the Epiphany, we celebrate an *epiphany*: how fitting!

Jesus is *made manifest, revealed* in this interesting incident....

But what do we celebrate when we celebrate the Baptism of Jesus?

An event that needed not take place in the first place?

Think about it. It is not easy to pinpoint.

Jesus is plunged into the waters of the Jordan (it must have been beautiful visually...).

But John the Baptist, the *Baptizer*, reacts in quite reasonable fashion to Jesus' coming:

"Wait a minute, there is something wrong with this scenario."

"I need to be baptized by *you*!" ...hello!

Jesus had no need to be baptized.

Why then was He baptized? To make John the Baptist feel good about his efforts?

Couldn't resist the cool waters? At the sight of others being baptized,

did Jesus come running towards John the Baptist, "Me too, me too! Ahhh, thank you."

This incident is rich, and necessitates some dissection...

Jesus did *not* need Baptism. He is "full of grace" (John 1:14) –

which is what we believe Baptism confers...

He is baptized because He makes use of John's Baptism for His own purposes.

He fittingly receives John's Baptism because

1. it does *not* confer what He does not need, i.e. grace.
2. it is the Baptism that stands at the *threshold* of the *New Covenant*.

How does Jesus make use of John's Baptism?

Aside from the epiphany that it affords (to which we will return...),

Jesus makes use of it to *institute* the Baptism which *does* confer grace, *the* Baptism.

As St. Ambrose (+397) says:

"Our Lord was baptized because He wished, not to be cleansed,
but to cleanse the waters, that,
being purified by the flesh of Christ that knew no sin,
they might have the virtue of baptism."

And as Gregory Nazianzus (+390) says:

"By going to John to be baptized by him, He sanctified baptism."

And as St. Thomas Aquinas (+1274) says:

"He wished to be baptized with a baptism which He clearly needed not,
that those who needed it might approach unto it."

In other words, thenceforth, God promises to make use of the simple element of water to communicate His life in a special way; nothing short of amazing!

Why?

Because we are flesh and blood beings for whom water is

- indispensably life-sustaining
- symbolically rich

God is very real and respectful and realistic in His involvement in our world...

The Baptism of Jesus not only establishes the Baptism that we have each received.

The Baptism of Jesus is an *epiphany*.

The Baptism of Jesus *reveals* Jesus,

and it reveals what occurs for those joined to Him, His friends

-- *in particular thanks to their Baptism.*

Jesus comes to be Baptized in the Jordan

– through which the Israelites entered the promised land.

We believe that we are granted to enter the “Promised Land”.

What is the “Promised Land”?

The “Promised Land” is not a place. It is nothing less than *God* Himself.

We are granted to enter God.

John the Baptist at first resists. He understandably protests.

As the same St. Gregory Nazianzus says,

“He is

- the lamp in the presence of the Sun
- the voice in the presence of the Word
- the friend in the presence of the Bridegroom
- the greatest of all born of woman
in the presence of the First-born of all creation
- the one who leapt in his mother’s womb
in the presence of the One adored in the womb
- the forerunner
in the presence of Him who has already come and is to come again.”

John the Baptist understandably protests, and Jesus lovingly insists.
“Allow it now.” – suggesting that John the Baptist was perhaps later baptized by Jesus.
“To fulfill all righteousness.” – referring to the communication that He, the Righteous One intends to communicate through Baptism, a communication which corresponds to the Divine Intention, and thus the reason for the Incarnation in the first place.

Jesus is plunged, and rises from the waters, to the opening of the heavens.
Jesus *opens* the life, the mystery of God! ...All we must do is want/receive it.
What exactly occurred in terms of physical phenomena we can only speculate...
Suffice it to say that:

- the skies indeed symbolically suggest for us the divine
- the term “the heavens” was used by devout Jews
to refer to God whose name was not to be uttered out of reverence

A dove descends upon Jesus,
which Matthew says is the form in which the Holy Spirit manifested Himself.
It *descends*, confirming the divine origin of Jesus.

Why a dove?

A dove is a gentle and loving and gregarious and uncomplicated creature.

The Holy Spirit is thus,
and the Holy Spirit, received at Baptism, brings this about in those who allow Him.
Then follows the voice of the Father, further confirming the divine origin of Jesus.
It is an epiphany, however, not only of Jesus and his divine origin, but of the *Trinity*.
It is the first explicit revelation of the Trinity in the life of Jesus.
Jesus is indeed from the Father, and of the Father.
Jesus is the Beloved, in whom, thanks to the opening of “the heavens”,
each of us is “the beloved.”.

Each of us is a beloved child of God.

God has given us everything, so that we be born again and live His very life
– which means: a happiness deep in the heart that no one and nothing can take from us.

And even though we fail and are easily distracted and self-absorbed,

the Holy Spirit safeguards the child of God in us, in whom God is pleased.

We, of course, need to take responsibility and make choices.

It is, after all, a *relationship*.

But God makes it possible, and safeguards the treasures he places within us.

Let us be full of hope.

Let us choose the Triune God, knowing that He is present and faithful.

I will close with words from St. Gregory Nazianzus, uttered 1600+ years ago:

“You are to enjoy more and more the pure and dazzling light of the Trinity,
as now you have received – though not in its fullness – a ray of its splendor,
proceeding from the One God, in Christ Jesus our Lord,
to whom be glory and power for ever and ever. Amen.”