

Baptism of the Lord, Cycle C

January 10, 2010

Readings: Isaiah 42:1-4, 6-7; Titus 2:11-14; 3:4-7; Luke 3:15-16, 21-22

Baptism Throughout the Year

In the Church's calendar, today is the last day of the Christmas Season. Today we celebrate the Feast of the Baptism of the Lord, and tomorrow we continue our calendar cycle by entering Ordinary Time. It's a cycle that will lead us to Lent, then the Easter Season, back to Ordinary Time, and then back around to start a new year next Advent.

As I reflected on today's feast, it struck me how it helps to tie together so many of the other feasts and seasons. It has always been considered a part of the Epiphany that we celebrated last week. While we usually associate the Epiphany with Christ's revelation to the Gentiles through the Magi, it is also associated with Christ's first miracle of turning water into wine at the wedding feast at Cana. It is also associated with today's feast because God the Father revealed His Son to all nations when He spoke from the cloud: ***"You are my beloved Son; with you I am well pleased."***

I ran across a sermon from St. Maximus in which he associates today's feast with the birth of Christ on Christmas. He says: ***"At Christmas he was born a man; today he is reborn sacramentally. Then he was born of a Virgin; today he is born in mystery."*** It's a good reminder for us to consider that we have two birthdays as well. We have the day of our physical birth, and we have the day of our spiritual rebirth through water and the Holy Spirit when we were baptized.

Today's feast also ties in with the season of Lent, because immediately after Jesus was baptized in the Jordan He went out into the desert for forty days to fast and to teach us how to resist the temptations of the devil. He reminds us that we need to rely on the strength of the Holy Spirit that we received in our baptisms; that through baptism we are temples of the Holy Spirit and share in the mission and ministry of Christ.

Today's feast reminds us of the feast of Pentecost, the birthday of the Church, when the Holy Spirit came upon the disciples as tongues of fire. We consider the difference between the baptism that John performed, which was an act of repentance, and that which Christ offers to us which adds forgiveness, but also justice and mercy. We heard John the Baptist this morning say: ***"I am baptizing you with water, but one mightier than I is coming....He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire."*** We hear about the purifying fire and it can foreshadow for us the fires of purgatory. It is a reminder for us to repent, forgive others so God will forgive us, and be merciful to others so that we can be well disposed to ask for God's mercy and reduce our time in purgatory.

And very importantly, I think that today's feast can be associated with the passion of Christ; when he was baptized in blood. When he was pierced with the lance on the cross, blood and water flowed from His side and made our salvation possible. We hear about this from St. Paul in our second reading when he says that Jesus Christ ***"gave himself for us to deliver us from all lawlessness and to cleanse for himself a people as his own, eager to do what is good."*** We are cleansed in baptism, but we are cleansed by the blood of Christ. The apostle John writes in one of his letters: ***"This is the one who came through water and Blood, Jesus Christ, not by water alone, but by water and Blood."***

The Spirit is the one who testifies, and the Spirit is truth. So there are three who testify, the Spirit, the water, and the Blood, and the three are of one accord.”

I think it is also important to associate today's feast with our own baptisms; our own cycles of life. Most of us were baptized as infants and we don't remember what took place on our spiritual birthday. So I think today's feast is a good occasion once a year to stop and reflect on what occurs during the baptismal rite; what happened to us at one time.

- We first welcome the children into the Church by a sign of the cross on their foreheads.
- Next they receive an anointing with blessed olive oil as a sign of spiritual strengthening. It is symbolic of the ancient athletes who rubbed their bodies down with oil to highlight their muscles.
- Next their parents and godparents stand in for them and renounce sin and make a profession of faith. It's the faith that they accept for themselves as they become adults.
- They then have water poured over their heads, or maybe they are immersed, and the minister baptizes them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.
- They then receive a second anointing, this time with the oil of Chrism, the same oil we use in the sacrament of Confirmation. Chrism is olive oil to which the very aromatic balsam has been added. At the time of Christ, because of its great expense, Chrism was only used for very special anointings; for anointing priests, prophets, and kings. It is a reminder that, through our baptisms, we become sharers in the priestly, prophetic, and kingly missions of Christ and His Church.
- They then receive a white garment which signifies the purity that they are called to maintain. We are reminded that we are temples of the Holy Spirit.
- They then receive a candle which is lit from the Pascal candle; the candle which is brought into the dark church at the Easter Vigil as a symbol of Christ who is the Light of the world. He is the light we are called to follow. He is the light that we are called to keep burning brightly in our hearts.
- And lastly, they received the Ephphetha Prayer, a prayer over their ears and mouths that their ears be touched to receive the Word of Christ and their mouths be touched to proclaim His faith.

Jesus' baptism in the Jordan kicked off His ministry. He was sent into the desert and then into the world to proclaim the Good News. Our baptisms were the beginnings of our spiritual lives and spiritual journeys. We are also called and sent to proclaim the Good News by our words and by our actions. It is a good day today to reflect on our journeys; to reflect on how well we are using the gifts we received at baptism; to reflect on how well we are fulfilling our mission.

Deacon Joe Hulway