

Feast of the Baptism of the Lord, Cycle B January 11, 2009

Readings: Isaiah 42:1-4, 6-7; Acts 10:34-38; Mark 1:7-11

More Manifestation

Merry Christmas! This is the last time I will be able to say this for awhile. Most have already taken down their Christmas trees and decorations. Some held off putting away their nativity sets until last Tuesday, January 6th, the traditional day for celebrating the arrival of the Magi, the Three Kings. But today, the Feast of the Baptism of the Lord, is the official end to the Christmas Season in the Church's liturgical year. It is the day we transition from celebrating the first manifestations of Jesus on earth, to celebrating Christ's years of earthly ministry.

Manifestation; remember that word from last week. We said that Epiphany meant manifestation; and we commemorated the visit by the Magi as a manifestation of Christ to the Gentile world. But in Church history there are three different events that are commemorated as part of the Epiphany of the Lord. We all know about the Magi, but what are the other two? Well let me refer to by breviary, to the common book of Christian prayer known as the Liturgy of the Hours. On the Feast of the Epiphany, the antiphon for evening prayer is: *"Three mysteries mark this holy day: today the star leads the Magi to the infant Christ; today water is changed into wine for the wedding feast; today Christ wills to be baptized by John in the river Jordan to bring us salvation."*

In all three of these events Christ made His divinity known to the world. Today we celebrate the Baptism of the Lord, but in a way it is a continuation of the feast of the Epiphany. Jesus reveals Himself as the awaited Messiah, but again the Church leaders refuse to recognize Him. We heard Isaiah's prophecy in our first reading that God will send His servant as *"a covenant of the people, a light for the nations, to open the eyes of the blind, to bring out prisoners from confinement, and from the dungeons those who live in darkness."* And what did God say about that servant in our reading from Isaiah? He said: *"Here is my servant whom I uphold, my chosen one with whom I am well pleased, upon whom I have put my spirit."*

Sound familiar? Sounds a lot like what God said when Jesus came out of the water after being baptized in the Jordan. We heard: *"You are my beloved Son; with you I am well pleased."* And Mark tells us that the Spirit, like a dove, descended upon Him. But those who studied scriptures, who studied prophecies looking for the coming of the Messiah did not recognize Him.

So today we have much to consider. We reflect on the Epiphany, Christ's manifestation to the world. We transition into Ordinary time and reflect on Jesus' mission and on His call to conversion. We reflect on how we live out the gospel message and how we to help make Christ's presence in the world known to others. We reflect on whether we will recognize Him and be prepared for when He comes again. But this feast of the Baptism of the Lord is also a good reason once each year to reflect on our own baptisms.

Baptism is pre-figured in the Old Testament as God uses water as a sign of life and of cleansing and purification. We hear this in the blessing we say over the baptismal water during the sacrament:

Father, you give us grace through sacramental signs, which tell us of the wonders of your unseen power.
In Baptism we use your gift of water, which you have made a rich symbol of the grace you give us in this sacrament.
At the very dawn of creation your Spirit breathed on the waters, making them the wellspring of all holiness.
The waters of the great flood you made a sign of the waters of Baptism, that make an end of sin and a new beginning of goodness.
You freed the children of Abraham from the slavery of Pharaoh, bringing them dry-shod through the waters of the Red Sea, to be an image of the people set free in Baptism.

Water brings new life at creation, cleanses from sin, and frees from slavery to sin again. Water is an important part of the sacrament as Jesus told Nicodemus: ***“Amen, amen, I say to you, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit. What is born of flesh is flesh and what is born of spirit is spirit. Do not be amazed that I told you, ‘You must be born from above.’”*** In baptism we are born again and become members of God’s family. We become sons and daughters of the Father. We become brothers and sisters of Christ. We are incorporated into the Church and become temples of the Holy Spirit. We are baptized in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.

So if an evangelical Christian approaches you and asks you if you have been “born again”, proudly say yes, that you were born again, and from above, with water and the Holy Spirit at your baptism. And make sure that the person asking the question understands that being born again means more than just saying a Jesus prayer; it means being baptized. Baptism is not just a symbolic event, it changes who we are forever. And Jesus says it is necessary.

Baptism is a wonderful gift from Christ, but it also comes with responsibilities that we need to remember. Through our incorporation into the Body of Christ we share in His mission which is a priestly, kingly, and prophetic mission. Through this mission we are called to serve God and be witnesses to his divine Kingdom; to make it present here on earth.

As you leave the church this morning, you will dip your fingers into the holy water and make the Sign of the Cross in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. And as you do, remember who you are; what you became through your baptism. And give glory and thanks to God who manifested Himself and made Himself present in your life for your salvation.

Deacon Joe Hulway