

THE BAPTISM OF THE LORD [A]

Isaiah 42: 1 – 4, 6 – 7

Acts 10: 34 – 38

Matthew 3: 13 – 17

Between the Holy Family's return from their exile in Egypt because of Herod's attempt to kill the child, Jesus, are the 'hidden years' at Nazareth. And, as Jesus grew up there He: "Grew and became strong, filled with wisdom; and the favour of God was upon him." Lk. 2: 52

Today we meet the adult Jesus standing humbly before John the Baptist asking to be baptised. But why should Jesus ask to be baptised?

Well, a number of theologians have said it's because this is the moment when Jesus was suddenly enlightened as to who He was, and what He'd come to do, after having led a perfectly normal life in Nazareth since coming back from exile in Egypt.

It was then, they say, that He became aware of His special relationship to God, and His religious mission.

But I don't believe that's a proper understanding of what Matthew actually says, or what He's trying to tell us about Jesus.

This is above all the moment when heaven is torn open and God, the Trinity of love - Father, Son, and Spirit - is unveiled as Jesus rises from the waters of the Jordan.

As Charles Wesley wrote in his famous Carol: "Veiled in flesh the God-head see, hail the incarnate Deity; born as man, with man to dwell, Jesus, our Emmanuel."

Veiled at His birth, but unveiled for our sakes here, at His Baptism.

Also, if we look at Luke's Gospel we'll see that Jesus, at least from the age of 12 when He discussed the Scripture - the Old Testament - with the religious 'experts' in the Temple, knew who He was. See Lk. 2: 41 - 52

Of course, if we go back further in both Matthew and Luke, we read that Jesus was conceived through the power of the Holy Spirit so knew from the womb who He was; as did Mary, His Mother, and Joseph, His adoptive Father. See Mt. 1: 18 - 25 & Lk. 1: 26 - 38

Then we have the witness of John the Apostle in his Gospel where, before John the Baptist baptises Jesus, says of Him: "Look, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!" Jn. 1: 29

John the Baptist who, even in his mother's womb, leaped with joy as he recognised His Lord and God in Mary's womb. See Lk. 2: 39 - 45

And here's that recognition again as John the Baptist sees beyond the ordinary man standing before him, to Jesus, the Lamb of God - the Word made flesh - who, on the Cross: "Loved me and gave himself for me." Gal. 2: 20

To say that Jesus suddenly woke up to who, and what He was at His Baptism, lives in the realms of modern-day psychological speculation; not the deep truth contained in the Gospel.

So the Feast of the Baptism of the Lord is placed within the Christmas season for a very good reason.

If we put together the witness of John the Baptist that Jesus is the Lamb of God, along with what we've heard about Jesus from Christmas until today's Gospel, then it becomes clear that there's more to the Christmas season than a baby in a manger.

A lot of people love the Christmas story because they think a baby threatens no one, so the whole thing is a happy event, which means nothing at all.

See Tom Wright: Matthew For Everyone Vol. 1 p. 13

But if you leave Jesus safely tucked up in His baby clothes and, when He does become a man, try to psychologise away the fact that Christianity has always held that He is: "True God and true man... the one and only Son of God." Council of Lyons II then the Baptism of the Lord is emptied of its meaning.

It just remains as the moment when the man, Jesus; not Jesus who is true God and true man, had His 'vocational experience' - His, 'coming of age' - so to speak.

And the key moment in all of this is when: "Jesus came from Galilee to the Jordan to be baptised by John. But John tried to deter him, saying,

'I need to be baptised by you, and do you come to me?' Jesus replied, 'Let it be so now; it is proper for us to do this to fulfil all righteousness.' Then John consented." Mt. 3: 13 - 15

What does Jesus mean by, 'to fulfil all righteousness?'

To fulfil all righteousness He submits to the saving power of God, and His plan for the salvation of the human race.

This involves Jesus totally identifying with us sinners; although He Himself is without sin.

For, as Paul writes of Jesus: "God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God." 2 Cor. 5: 21

To fully understand the Baptism of Jesus we must look at it from the perspective of the Cross and Resurrection.

Because, at His Baptism, Jesus loaded the burden of all of our sins, and guilt upon His shoulders, and bore it down into the depths of the Jordan.

He began His journey to the Cross and Resurrection - the journey through which He saved us - by stepping into the place of sinners at the Jordan.

This one act is an anticipation of the Cross and Resurrection.

And the whole significance of Jesus' Baptism, the fact that He bears, 'all righteousness,' is fulfilled perfectly in those two future events.

The fact that Jesus: "Who, being in very nature God, did not regard equality with God something to be grasped [but] humbled himself by becoming obedient to death - even death on a cross!"

Phil. 2: 6

The fact that Jesus submits to being Baptised is His acceptance of death on the Cross for our sins. And the voice of the Father as Jesus comes up from the waters, declaring: "This is my Son, whom I love." Mt. 3: 17 is the Father's guarantee of the Son's Resurrection because of His unflinching faithfulness.

Christian Baptism is THE most important Sacrament we'll receive because, as Paul wrote about Baptism: "When we were joined with Christ Jesus in baptism, we joined him in his death. For we died and were buried with Christ by baptism. And just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glorious power of the Father, now we also may live new lives." Rm. 6: 3 - 4

Sadly, quite often, people seek Baptism for their children without thinking through the implications of the promises they will make on behalf of their child: because Baptism, like Marriage, is a life-long commitment.

Cardinal Leon-Joseph Suenens, one of the leading Bishops at the Second Vatican Council, and, who at that time was thought of as a 'papabile;' someone tipped to be the next Pope, came to Oxford in 1977 to conduct a mission to the University.

His opening words struck me very forcefully: "We have many baptised persons [he said]. Baptised, yes, but are they Christians? The world is filled with baptised non-Christians."

Your God? The Oxford Mission 1977 p. 15

He wasn't in any way diminishing what actually happens at Baptism.

He was trying to make us think that we must take Baptism seriously as it makes us members of Jesus, and His Church - for life.

He was seeking to stir us up to enter into communion with Jesus through an intimate, and personal encounter with Him.

For, as Pope Benedict said 30 years later: "Christianity is not a new philosophy or new morality. [And] we are Christians only if we encounter Christ."

Pope Benedict XVI: Wednesday Audience 3 September 2008

Because: "Our happiness depends, in the end, on the encounter with Jesus and on friendship with Him." Benedict XVI: Address to Students 10 April 2006

If our faith has become lukewarm, and we don't have that intimate friendship with Jesus, let's rekindle the grace given to us in Baptism by not merely saying - but really meaning - the words of the Creed.