

The Baptism of the Lord
January 9, 2011

The prophet Isaiah identified the very presence of Christ with this proclamation, “Thus says Jehovah: Here is my servant whom I uphold, my chosen one with whom I am pleased, upon whom I have put my spirit; he shall bring forth justice to the nations, not crying out, not shouting, not making his voice heard in the street I Jehovah have called you for the victory of justice . . . to open the eyes of the blind, to bring out prisoners from confinement, and from the dungeon, those who live in darkness.”

The feast of the Baptism of Jesus marks the ending of the Christmas season and gives introduction to Jesus as the anointed servant of God. If the Christmas season has served to reveal God to us in the person of Jesus, He who was born as a child and manifested as the way, the truth, and the light, then today the Holy Spirit reveals Him as the beloved servant Son of God in whom the Father is well pleased.

As the Church enters this next season in the liturgical year, we will begin to learn by example the ministry of a servant, and in whose likeness we are to be to the world in which by the waters of baptism we too have been reborn.

For centuries on end, biblical scholars and theologians have debated the baptism of Jesus. The main issue here focuses on whether or not the sinless Son of God needed to be baptized with John’s baptism. Why would a holy God need to be baptized for the forgiveness of sin? The response of John following the Lord’s request for baptism is in no little way etched in the annals of the

gospel, "I need to be baptized by you, and yet you are coming to me."

How different yet how much alike is the dialogue between Jesus and Peter following his refusal to be washed by the Master. Isn't it interesting how we fledgling disciples tend to argue with God about matters of such grave importance – as if we knew best –or is it a matter of being unsure about the consequences related to being obedient?

He came to Simon Peter, who said to him, "Master, are you going to wash my feet?" Jesus answered and said to him, "What I am doing, you do not understand now, but you will understand later." Peter said to him, "You will never wash my feet." Jesus answered him, "Unless I wash you, you will have no inheritance with me." Simon Peter said to him, "Master, then not only my feet, but my hands and head as well.

At this point, Jesus began to teach Peter regarding the meaning and purpose of baptism.

"Do you realize what I have done for you? You call me 'teacher' and 'master,' and rightly so, for indeed I am. If I, therefore, the master and teacher, have washed your feet, you ought to wash one another's feet. I have given you a model to follow, so that as I have done for you, you should also do. Amen, amen, I say to you, no slave is greater than his master or any messenger greater than the one who sent him. If you understand this, blessed are you if you do it (John 13:6-17).

Ruling out the necessity to be fully washed again, Jesus instructed Peter, “But so that the scripture might be fulfilled.” “I have given you a model to follow, so that as I have done for you, you should also do. The servant is not greater than His master, or the messenger greater than the one who sent Him.”

So then today, how does this information relate to you and me?

The baptism of Jesus inaugurates the ministry of Jesus as the suffering servant Christ. This fact most of us are willing to accept. But, what of our own baptism, what does it signify? Herein lies a problem for many moderns and post/moderns. We are a people living in a different age and in a different culture; yet, for all our good intentions, we have a tendency to try to understand Jesus in light of our own culture and experience. Naturally we want to validate our own spirituality, but when we try to make sense out of the life of Jesus by validating our own beliefs and/or purposes, we end up molding Jesus into our own theology rather than simply imitating Him and accepting the mystery of His saving acts as a model for us to imitate.

If we have been taught a particular theology concerning baptism, for example, that it is primarily an outward sign of an inward work rather than the very act of initiation into the sufferings and triumphs of Christ, then it is quite possible we will try to understand the baptism of Jesus through the same theological lens. Should we not then consider the life of Jesus, and in particular His baptism, through the lens of the Old Testament prophets and the Hebrew Scripture? This was the model used by the early church in Acts 2:42, “They continued steadfastly in the

memoirs of the Apostles and the reading of the Prophets.” So then I would like to draw your attention to the Tradition of the Early Church Fathers by citing a Baptism of the Lord Homily written by the 4th Century (AD 335 – 394) theologian Gregory of Nyssa. He writes,

I find that not only do the Gospels, written after the Crucifixion, proclaim the grace of Baptism, but, even before the Incarnation of our Lord, the ancient Scripture everywhere prefigured the likeness of our regeneration; not clearly manifesting its form, but fore-showing, in dark sayings, the love of God to man. And as the Lamb was proclaimed by anticipation, and the Cross - was foretold by anticipation, so, too, was Baptism shown forth by action and by word. Let us recall its types to those who love good thoughts— for the festival season of necessity demands their recollection.

Later in the same baptismal sermon, Gregory explains how water is to be viewed in regard to baptism,

And the wood of the Cross is of saving efficacy for all men, though it is, as I am informed, a piece of a poor tree, less valuable than most trees are. So a bramble bush showed to Moses the manifestation of the presence of God: so the remains of Elisha raised a dead man to life; so clay gave sight to him that was blind from the womb. And all these things, though they were matter without soul or sense, were made the means for the performance of the great marvels wrought by them when they received the power of God. Now by a similar train of reasoning, water also, though it is nothing else

than water, renews the man to spiritual regeneration, when the grace from above hallows it.

During the same time period St Cyril of Jerusalem (AD 313 – 386) wrote concerning baptism,

“We did not really die, we were not really buried, we were not really crucified and raised again; but our imitation was in a figure, and our salvation in reality. Christ was actually crucified, and actually buried, and truly rose again; and all these things He has freely bestowed upon us, that we, sharing His sufferings by imitation, might gain salvation in reality. O surpassing loving-kindness! Christ received nails in His undefiled hands and feet, and suffered anguish; while on me without pain or toil by the fellowship of His suffering He freely bestows salvation.

Let no one then suppose that Baptism is merely the grace of remission of sins, or further, that of adoption; as John's was a baptism conferring only remission of sins: whereas we know full well, that as it purges our sins, and ministers to us the gift of the Holy Ghost, so also it is the counterpart of the sufferings of Christ.

Both of these men were from different regions, but each offered a similar perspective concerning baptism, and these are just but two examples from only two of the early church fathers concerning a theology relating to Baptism. It should be noted that their thoughts seem to mirror the prevailing opinions of the Early Church at large concerning baptism.

So then, based on the Scripture and collateral historical information, we are now ready to address the importance of the Baptism of the Lord. In a nutshell, we conclude that Jesus' baptism fulfilled all the requirements needed to address all the OT prophetic announcements concerning the Anointed Messiah. His Baptism by John was one more step in the fulfillment of divine prophecy.

In His baptism, Jesus identified himself with the sinfulness of mankind. Not that He committed any sin, no, indeed He was sinless, but that in the waters of Baptism He literally took on himself the form of sin, bearing its temptation and weight, yet without He himself sinning. On the cross, he bore the consequences of our sin in His suffering victoriously; in His resurrection we celebrate the victory over our sin in our living victoriously.

In baptism Jesus identified with sin, so that we in baptism might be freed from sin. Its almost as if our sin was present there in the waters of baptism even before Jesus entered the currents of the Jordan, but then when He came up out of the water, for some three and a half years He carried with out sinning all of our sin to the cross by His sufferings. Nailing it to the tree wood of the cross, sin lost its defiling power, and then once we have been washed in the waters of regeneration sin loses its defiling power over us.

We might consider one more analogy and that being the Sacrament of Marriage. In His Baptism, itself a sacrament of initiation, we might say that Jesus identified Himself with us as a husband. The Baptism of the Lord publically announced to the

world and to the demonic powers His intention to be united with us becoming His Bride.

In our Baptism, we too are initiated, not into identification with sin, but with identification with purity and holiness in Christ Jesus. Here the regenerating waters become both grave and mother. We experience the grave because our old sinful flesh is crucified with Christ, while at the same time the water is mother and womb in that we are born-again of the water and the Spirit in the newness and righteousness of Christ.

To be born again is to live again, this time not unto our own selfish desires, but to follow Jesus and live as He lives. Therefore to deny the works of Baptism is to deny our identification with the saving grace of our Lord and Redeemer and to deny our part and participation in His suffering.

Certainly, faith is a factor in both the sacraments of baptism and marriage. But where in each does faith find its initiation? Indeed, in marriage it is the faith of the husband in taking a wife. His is the task of selecting; hers is the process of consenting.

In Baptism, His is the task of selecting; ours is the process of consenting. In Jewish culture the bride was selected by the groom's father, often long before their children were aware of the reality. Our heavenly Father too selected us long before we were aware of the arrangement. Even before the foundations of the earth were established our hearts were pledged to the Lord in Holy Communion. Therefore, ours is the continued process of

consenting, “not my will, but Thy will be done.” Not my will but thy will be done both in prosperity and in adversity.

Finally, we must take note of the Great Commission given to His eleven disciples on the designated mount, “Then Jesus approached and said to them, ‘All power in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go, therefore, and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, until the end of the age’” (Matt. 28:18-20).

Three active commands can be noted in this passage, 1) Go make disciples of all nations, 2) Baptize them in the name of the Father Son and Holy Spirit, and 3) Teach them to observe all that I have commanded you.

In conclusion we must take note. Our challenge is monumental, yet the challenge is precise and it is clear, and best of all the challenge is doable. As His disciples we are called and commissioned to continue the work of the Messiah. In Him we are to bring the gospel to whoever will hear and follow. We are to baptize them in the name of the Triune God, and then we are to help recreate society by teaching by example what it means to be a living sacrifice ready to observe or to do all that He has commanded.

The Baptism of Jesus Christ compels us to follow His example. Love God and love neighbor in the spirit of the Sermon on the Mount. May the same Holy Spirit who descended on risen Lord

continue to give us the willingness, wisdom, and what it takes to continue in His ministry of reconciliation?

We ask all of these things in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.