

THE BAPTISM OF THE LORD, C
BAPTISM: A JOURNEY OF FAITH

“This is My Beloved Son, My favour rests upon Him” (Luke 3: 22)

The End and the Beginning: The Baptism of the Lord, which we celebrate today, marks the end of Christmas celebrations. The cards, the flowers, the candles, the crib and all the Christmas decorations are taken down, leaving us with a nostalgia. This feast day does not shut the doors to the joyful celebration of the Christmas, but it does open the door to the Ordinary Time, that liturgical season, during which we share in the mystery of the life and ministry of Christ leading on to His Death and resurrection. For this year (Cycle C), we shall be seeing Jesus from the eyes of St. Luke, the only Gentile author in the New Testament with the most peculiar stories and parables in the Gospels.

The Theophany: The Feast of the Baptism of our Lord is a Theophany, God’s Self-manifestation, as we see the Trinity in collaborative action, as during the time of creation, and Transfiguration. For here we see God the Son baptised; God the Holy Spirit descending in the form of a dove and God the Father speaking. This is very significant because at each of our baptism, we were baptised in the name of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit (Matthew 28: 19). Thus, we were grafted into the Person of the Blessed Trinity. Baptism thus opens us into this new life of union and oneness with the Triune God. By this, we, the baptised, pray, not outside of God, but within God, because we are one with Him.

Did Jesus Need the Baptism of John? Jesus explained to John that it was to fulfil all righteousness (Matthew 3: 15). So, the first reason given by Jesus Himself is that His baptism from John was to fulfil God’s plan. Remember, Jesus’ food was to do the will of the Father in all things (John 4: 34). By going to John to be baptised with sinners, “Brood of vipers” (Matthew 3: 7), Jesus was identifying with sinful humanity, whom He came to redeem; He plunged Himself into the dirty waters of human sins so that He might cleanse the waters of our baptism; He accepted the weakness of man by letting Himself be immersed in the Jordan so that He might give us strength at His rising from the dead. Pope Benedict XVI in *Jesus of Nazareth* elucidates: “Jesus loaded the burden of all mankind guilt on His shoulders; He bore it down into the depths of Jordan. He inaugurated His public activity by stepping into the place of sinners. His inaugural gesture was in anticipation of the Cross.” Jesus’ baptism became an occasion of His anointing as the Messiah-King of Israel and His confirmation as the *Only Begotten Son of God*. St. Maximus of Turin even articulates further: “Christ is baptised not that He may be sanctified in the waters, but that He Himself may sanctify the waters, and by His own purification may purify those streams He touches. For the consecration of Christ is the greater consecration of another element.” Scott Hahn explains it thus: “Jesus doesn’t submit to John’s baptism as a sinner in need of purification. He humbles Himself to pass through Jordan’s waters to lead a new “exodus”—opening up the promised land of heaven so that all peoples can hear the words pronounced over Jesus today, words once reserved only

for Israel and its king: that each of us is a beloved son or daughter of God (see Gen. 22: 2; Ex. 4: 22; Ps. 2: 7).”

“As soon as Jesus was baptised and He came up out of the water, and suddenly the heavens opened, and He saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and coming down on Him”: This event reveals the prophetic and Messianic mission of Jesus. It recalls the commissioning of Ezekiel at the River Chebar where “the heavens opened” before Ezekiel and he saw “visions from the Lord” (Ezekiel 1: 1); and a spirit came upon him (Ezekiel 2: 2). Like Ezekiel, Jesus is being commissioned as a greater prophet. Thus, the Spirit rested on His shoulders. The Spirit coming on Jesus also reveals Jesus’ anointing as the Messiah-King. It was sometimes the case that the Spirit would come powerfully on some kings of Israel. Samuel told Saul that the sign of his being anointed king of Israel would be the Spirit coming on him (1 Samuel 10: 6). When David was anointed king of Israel, the “Spirit of the Lord rushed on him” (1 Samuel 16: 13). Jesus, at His baptism is also revealed as the new King of Israel, and therefore, the Spirit of the Lord descended on His shoulders, in fulfilment of the expectation of the people of Israel that “the Spirit of the Lord shall rest upon” the future royal Son of David (Isaiah 11: 2; 61: 1). Thus, as in the First Reading (Is. 40: 1-5, 9-11), Jesus is “the Lord coming with power” to console Israel, “atone for their sins” and feed them like a shepherd feeds his flock.

Jesus’ Baptism Recalls Our Baptism: As we commemorate the Baptism of the Lord, it is an opportunity for us to recall and reflect on our baptism, which takes its root from the Lord’s baptism. By His baptism, Christ the Light of the world goes ahead of us, like the “pillar of light” went ahead of the Jews on their hazardous journey to the Promised Land, so that we too, having been baptised in Him, may walk through this earthly vale with His divine light on to our salvation. On the day we were baptised we became one with Christ – God’s beloved children – filled with the Holy Spirit. God was pleased with us after we made the promises to reject Satan and all his works and empty promises; and professed our belief in God, in Jesus, in the Holy Spirit and in the Church. It is a privilege to be so bonded with the divine. On a day like this, we need to ask ourselves some salient questions: How strong is the faith we professed? Where is the Holy Spirit in our lives? Is God still pleased with us? Are we doing God’s work? How far have we travelled in our faith journey? What is our relationship with God?

My dear friends, our baptism unites us also with the mission of Christ, that means we share in His prophetic role, to be missionaries and witnesses to the Gospel; we share in His priestly role, to offer ourselves as sacrifices pleasing to the Lord in the service of God and others; and in His kingly role, to work for justice and peace wherever we find ourselves. Our baptism imposes a duty on us as spelled out by St. Paul in the Second Reading (Titus 2: 11-14, 3: 4-7) “What we have to do is to give up everything that does not lead to God, and all worldly ambitions; we must be self-restrained and live good and religious lives here in this present world.” Let the celebration of this feast be an opportunity for us to recall the day we were baptised; let it rekindle that light that was entrusted to us;

let it awaken the zeal of the Spirit that we received; let it bring back the joy we shared on that day; and let it revitalise those gifts we were given so that we can be true witnesses of The One whose baptism we celebrate today. May God grant us the grace to live out our baptismal promises with courage, truth, and love.