

In this morning's gospel lesson, we read of the baptism of Jesus in the Jordan. This event in the life of Christ can, and has, caused a lot of confusion. Why? Well, John's baptism was a sign of repentance, of a cleansing symbolizing a death to sin, a turning away from the self, and an embrace of God. Of course, these meanings fail when we come to Jesus for he has no sin from which to turn, and as God, He is already eternally in God's embrace.

And a further clarification here between Christians baptism – baptism as we know and practice it – and John's baptism. What John Baptist did was not a sacrament as we think of it. It did not administer the Holy Spirit to the baptized person. It was merely a declaration of personal intention, very similar today to what many professing Christians in non-sacramental contexts believe about the meaning of baptism. All of this leads to a lot of confusion that we can attempt to clarify this morning.

But before we get there, first let us disabuse ourselves of the notion that Christ was not Christ before His baptism – that He was merely a man. Orthodox Christian belief asserts that Christ was everlastingly Christ and never was not Christ, that He is co-eternal with the Father and with the Holy Ghost. Christ exists as God before His Incarnation, and He exists as God at the Incarnation. The baby Jesus is no less God than He was at His baptism. That means that even the infant Jesus had all of the characteristics of God – omniscience, omnipotence, omnipresence, among others.

The great mystery with which millennia of believers have struggled is that we do not comprehend how the human and divine natures of Christ interact. Still again, we must assert that Christ has two distinct natures that remain separate, but yet exist in perfect unity in one person. If Christ is not fully man in all aspects, then He is not our representative. If Christ is not fully God in all aspects, then He is not sinless, and He is not infinite and able to take upon Him the sins of the world, He is not the perfect sacrifice.

The view that Christ was merely human until His baptism and then is the Messiah afterwards is referred to as adoptionism. With this view, one has neither a human representative or a perfect sacrifice, for the implication is that Christ becomes something other than human at His baptism.

What, then, is going on at Christ's baptism?

Let us first address the more obvious implications. First, we see this as Jesus' public anointing as Messiah. We have a Theophany, a revelation, a manifestation of the Trinity, so that all who witness this event receive the manifestation of Christ – that He is the second person of the Holy Trinity, Immanuel, God, in His fullness, with us. Thus the tie-in to the Epiphany season.

Also we find a key in what John Baptist proclaim about Christ. "There cometh one mightier than I after me, the latchet of whose shoes I am not worthy to stoop down and unloose. I indeed have baptized you with water: but he shall baptize you with the Holy Ghost." So we are reminded here that Jesus fundamentally changes the meaning of baptism. Jesus transforms this ritual from a commonly practiced rite, an ordinance, to a sacrament.

How does this happen? Well, through two major works of Christ. First, let us begin with the second, the one that takes place at the end of Christ's ministry. In the redemption, Christ makes humanity fit to receive the life of the Spirit, by cleansing us who believe in Him from sin, both the sin which is ours by nature and the sin which we actually commit. Now backtracking to the first event which we are discussing more fully this morning, the Holy Spirit here descends upon Christ so that Christ now sends the Spirit to us in baptism. Again remember the words of the baptist. One is coming who will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.

Christian Trinitarian baptism is sacramental. It does something to us – mainly it is the promised outpouring of the saving presence of the Holy Spirit in us and the grafting of the believer into the body of Christ, the Church. This sacrament is connected directly to the baptism of Jesus in two ways. First, Christ is revealed to be the source of the Spirit for the healing of the world. Second, Christ becomes the prototype for the baptism of His followers.

Any interpretation of the baptism of Christ must begin with the doctrine of Creation. Christ is present at creation. He is the Word of God that is spoken. He is the Voice of God of which we were reminded today in Psalm 29. There we read, “the Voice of the Lord is upon the waters. It is the Lord that ruleth the sea. The voice shaketh the cedars. The voice of the lord divideth the flames of fire and shaketh the wilderness. The Lord sitteth above the water-flood, and the Lord remaineth a King for ever.” So we should not interpret this as the waters of baptism doing something to Christ, but, if anything, that Christ purifies and becomes the source of the healing waters. Add to this the immediacy of the Holy Spirit in this event, and the image portrayed for us here is that the waters flowing from Christ spiritually represent the outpouring of the Holy Ghost to the believer in this sacrament.

For us, as followers of Christ, what does that mean except that our life, our being, is established in Christ? Baptism then becomes our initiation into God. The words of God spoken to Christ are thus vicariously spoken to us for we are in Christ. The Spirit of God descending like a dove upon Christ, descend upon us as well for we are in Christ. We are now God’s beloved sons and daughters for we are in Christ and what blessing is poured out upon Him in His manhood is also truly poured out upon us by proxy as it were.

This event should recall for us the interaction of Christ with the woman at the well. At that time, Jesus said, “If you knew the gift of God, and who it is who says to you, ‘Give Me a drink,’ you would have asked Him, and He would have given you living water. ... whoever

drinks of the water that I shall give him will never thirst. But the water that I shall give him will become in him a fountain of water springing up into everlasting life." The waters of baptism therefore, are the fountain of life given to us flowing abundantly from Christ. This is what is happening in the baptism of Christ. The blessings of God, our forgiveness of sins, our redemption from slavery to sin, are mediated to us through Our Lord Jesus Christ. The healing waters reach even us who were once far off and draw us into intimate fellowship with God.

As the divine life takes residence in us and transforms us into the renewed image of God, into icons of everlasting life, this life must be made manifest unto others. The life of Christ in us, that fountain of living water springing up within us, means that we now find joy and purpose and meaning in this world that is independent of our current time, circumstances, and deprivations. And it means that we are gifted to take up our place in the body of Christ through the exercise of our gifts, to the health of the body of Christ, and for the growth of the kingdom of God in the world. The life of Christ given to us finds its fullest expression when we let that life flow from us to our brothers and sisters in Christ and to the world as a whole.

Of course the epistle lesson, which continues in St. Paul's epistle to the Romans in chapter 12, highlights for us the ministry that each of us has to one another within the Church.

"HAVING then gifts differing according to the grace that is given to us, whether prophecy, let us prophesy according to the proportion of faith; or ministry, let us wait on our ministering; or he that teacheth, on teaching; or he that exhorteth, on exhortation: he that giveth, let him do it with simplicity; he that ruleth, with diligence; he that sheweth mercy, with cheerfulness." We are to serve each other in humility and love, and here we remember that Christian love is not about feeling a certain way towards each other. It is about action. It is about serving each other. Love is about actively seeking the good of others than about feeling a certain way towards them. In our baptisms, we are gifted by the Holy Spirit to love each other and therefore to serve each other according to our gifts.

Also, as we mentioned last week, when the Church lives this out, we fulfill our calling to be the continuing manifestation of Christ to the world drawing all men to Him. If the life of Christ, the Spirit of God, is flowing through us, then we will be true ambassadors for the Kingdom of God. We will bring the healing life of Christ to the world. The inward wellspring of life must be manifest outwardly.

What does this look like? Our reading from the prophet Zechariah this morning paints a picture of this for us. There we read about the re-establishment of Jerusalem which is the symbol of the presence of God in this world. We read the prophecies about the fullness, the blessedness, of life of those who live in that holy city. We read that people from all over the world would seek out the people of God and plead with them to bring them to the temple where the true God is worshiped.

The challenge presented to us this morning is to ask ourselves individually, "Is my life characterized by joyful life in God's Kingdom. Does the living water of Christ quench my spiritual thirst and flow out of me to those around me?" Such a joy as this is not something that we can gin up. This isn't about pretending or putting on a show of contentment. No, we must find real joy and contentment in Christ. We must know first in our minds and then in our hearts that our sins are fully and generously forgiven, that we are grafted into Christ in the Church, that the struggles of this life are working for us an eternal glory that exceeds all that we can imagine, and that our loving service to God and to our neighbors really matters beyond its immediate impact.

All of this is a gift of God, and it is a glorious gift indeed. May we be reminded this morning of the precious gift of the Spirit that we received in our baptisms. May we be reminded that, in Christ, we are God's beloved children, and as such God is well-pleased with us. And may the reality of these truths shine through us to the world. In thanksgiving to Him, let us

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receive these gifts with gladness and with joy.

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost. AMEN.