

THE BAPTISM OF JESUS

Nicky Ing - 11th January 2004

Isaiah 6:1-4, Psalm 29, Acts 8:14-17, Luke 3: 15-17, 21-22.

Today we find John the Baptist at the River Jordan, where he preached repentance, baptized Jesus, and told the people how much greater Jesus was than himself. John's story is so significant that we hear parts of it every year, from different Gospels... John was quite a colourful character....clearly he was a charismatic preacher, rough and tough...he warned people, calling them to turn from their sinful ways...and his teaching was very powerful....we are told that thousands came to be baptized by John in the Jordan....even though he threatened them with the wrath of God and told them they were a bunch of poisonous snakes. He seems to have been rather a wild and frightening person...but he was brave too. I suppose we would say today that he called a spade a shovel!!! His direct approach wasn't really designed to convince people in a gentle and polite way that they needed to make a decision about God in their lives.

But this is a story not so much about John the Baptist, as about Jesus.... What Jesus did that day at the Jordan River was to serve as a model for his public ministry. He would not keep himself apart from sinners. He would not wait for them to come to him...he would seek them out and go amongst them; he would make friends with them, and welcome them. Jesus didn't stand apart or put himself above those people he came to save...he joined them right where they were. We see here too, how Jesus clearly chooses the way of humility. He does not appear with a great fanfare as a powerful saviour...announcing a new order.....no, he comes quietly, along with the many sinners who are receiving a baptism of repentance...and his choice is affirmed by the powerful voice from Heaven: ***'You are my Son, the Beloved...With you I am well pleased'***. The story of Jesus' baptism is an Epiphany story....meaning a revelation, a showing.....Jesus is revealed here as the Son of God.....What is revealed for us, too, is the ***prayerfulness*** of Jesus....we find, if we read Luke's Gospel carefully, that this is evident at many of the key moments in Jesus life and ministry. Prayer is the key to the relationship...and, by the way.....(***How do we experience our relationship with God? Do we take time to pray, to listen, to just be with God, in our busy lives???***) It is while Jesus is praying after his baptism that we read ***'the heaven was opened'*** and we know that we are about to experience the intervention of God...and so it proves to be, as we watch and listen...First we ***see*** something...***The Holy Spirit descending on him in bodily form, like a Dove'*** and then we ***hear*** something... a voice from Heaven.. ***"You are my Beloved Son; In you I am well pleased."*** Jesus has made a choice, the moment has arrived, after 30 years in quiet, unassuming growth in maturity and wisdom....to move forward into the public ministry to which his Father has called him. He has

reached a crossroads in his life...and even though he must have reached that moment after a lot of prayer and reflection...it can't have been an easy moment...he must have needed reassurance, and affirmation.....And not only does he receive approval from on high for this mission...he also receives power from on high for it. The visible descent of the Holy Spirit in the form of a dove signifies that...the Spirit is not given to Jesus just for that moment, but remains with him throughout his public ministry. If we were to read on into the next chapter of Luke, we would find Jesus being tempted by the devil, who encourages him to follow the way of the world.....to be spectacular, be important, choose the powerful way...but Jesus rejects this option and chooses God's way, a way of humility which gradually brings him to the way of the Cross...the way of sacrifice. ***(Just a thought for us....What sacrifices, if any, are we willing to make, in order to follow Jesus?)***

So, at his Baptism, there were certain things that happened to Jesus.

- His identity was revealed and affirmed: as the ***Son of God***.
- He was identified as the focus of God's ***love***.
- He was affirmed as being ***very pleasing*** to God, His Father.
- He was physically given ***God's Holy Spirit***.
- He was joined into a ***new group***, those who were baptized by John.

We, too, receive these same gifts when we are baptized. We receive the gift of water. Water is life. Without water there is no life. (Pictures of Mars landscape in newspapers this week.....rocky barren...no water...no life) . In baptism, we receive a new identity...the meaning of our name is now transformed,,it is a name given by God...a child of God, and loved by God, because of the salvation and new life offered by Jesus. We move from the darkness of death and into the light of the resurrection of Jesus...and the candle lit is the symbol of this new life which is given us by Jesus. We are given the gift of God's Spirit...and the expectation that God's Spirit in us will strengthen and empower us to be followers of Jesus, and lead us to lives of holiness and joy. We are given a community, a family...we join with the people who are present at our baptism, and who are already baptized, and with ***everyone*** who was ever baptized.....The community of saints!! And, yes, there are still plenty of tax collectors and prostitutes in that community...there are those who may disappoint us, and irritate us...or who don't seem to pull their weight, or seem to expect too much of us!!!.....one of the ways we ***know*** that God loves and accepts us just as we are is because God loves and accepts other people who are just as weak and sinful as we are! ***(By the way, how tightly do I hold onto the family of God, my church family.... do I value each person? And am I being true to the direction in which I was pointed at my baptism???)***

This feast which we celebrate today, and in which we recall the baptism of Jesus, is an opportunity to renew the grace of our own baptism within us. God calls *us* by name...he says to each of us: '***You are my beloved son, or you are my beloved daughter***'. And the Spirit descends on *us*, we are signed with the cross, the sign of Christ...because we too are given a mission: to participate in the work of Jesus. We are not called to save the world, or to solve all its problems! (Perhaps we need to remind ourselves about that, and we hardly need to be reminded about our own vulnerability!!!!) But each one of us has a unique calling, in our families and homes, in our places of work, and in living out our lives in the world around us. If we are faithful to small everyday tasks, it is one of the ways in which we can respond to the problems of our time and of participating in the work of Jesus. We are each called to grow in the image and likeness of Jesus, in wisdom and compassion, and in grace. It will take us a lifetime...but we need to continually be reminded that our baptism has committed us to the Christian life, which is a life of service. ***(How seriously do we take these promises to heart? And how is my relationship with the living God?...these are questions we could ask ourselves and God this week, perhaps...a new Year is always a good opportunity for honest reflection and resolution...)***

I came across a reflection on ***Baptism*** as I was preparing for this morning. It was written by Flor McCarthy, an Irish priest whose writings are well known.

***Baptism was not over and done with
The day we were taken to the font.
We are baptized by all that happens to us in life.
We are baptized by hardship; in its turbulent waters
We are purified of all that is false and useless.
We are baptized by suffering; in its murky waters
we grow in humility and compassion.
We are baptized by joy; in its gurgling waters
We experience the goodness of life.
We are baptized by love: in its singing waters
We blossom like flowers in the sun.
Baptism is like the planting of a seed.
It will take a lifetime for this seed to grow and ripen.***

So, let us give thanks to God the Father for giving us the gift of his Son...to Jesus Christ who has brought us the wonderful gift of new life which we received at our baptism...and to the Holy Spirit, who sustains us in this gift...which is the unconditional love of God in our lives. May we use these gifts to bring this love to others so that the Kingdom of God may continue to grow. **Amen.**