

## The Baptism of the Lord

January 9, 2011

Today brings an end to our Christmas celebrations. And we see the third and last of the three great manifestations by which were made known to us that our God had come among us in a very special way.

The first of these manifestations was through the story of the birth of Jesus in the stable at Bethlehem. The first people privileged to experience this manifestation were the shepherds, representing the poor, the sinful and the social outcasts on whom Luke's Gospel is especially focused.

The second manifestation, the Epiphany, celebrated last Sunday, reflects Matthew's emphasis that Jesus was born not only for his own people but for "people of every race, language and way of life."

The third and final manifestation of God's presence among us through Jesus is his baptism by John in the Jordan. His baptism is found in all four gospels. That Jesus was baptized by John is among the most certain historical facts in the gospel tradition. We might very well wonder, along with John the Baptist, why Jesus needed to be baptized. "It is I who need baptism from you," John said to Jesus, "and yet you come to me!"

What is the gospel focus? The person of Jesus. Who is he? It is necessary to make clear who he is and why he is significant. How does Matthew accomplish this? The heavens are opened. What does this mean? Communication between heaven and earth is opened up, between God and humankind. This possibility is made concrete when the Holy Spirit descends upon Jesus and a heavenly voice speaks.

All three images – heavens opening, Spirit descending, voice speaking prepare for one revelation: Who is this Jesus? The answer: "This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased." It is an allusion to our first reading, the passage from Isaiah: "Here is my servant, whom I uphold, my chosen, in whom my soul delights. I have put my spirit upon him. He will bring forth justice to the nations."

“My Son... my servant.” This unique Son of God is to be a unique servant, the Suffering Servant of God. In this unexpected sense he is to be the Messiah, the subject of the four Suffering Servant songs in Isaiah. Though utterly innocent, he will suffer horribly for his people. He is the Servant who “will not grow faint or be crushed until he has established justice in the earth.”

Wonderful scriptural stuff, you will say, but how does it touch you and me? One way struck me as soon as I linked the words from heaven in Matthew to the words of Yahweh in Isaiah. In our very baptism you and I are addressed in the words of our Lord: “Here is my servant, whom I uphold. My chosen, in whom my soul delights. I have put my spirit upon him. He will bring forth justice to the nations.” In the light of this first of the four Suffering Servant songs, three words challenge us: justice, servant, suffering.

*Justice.* As for Jesus, so for you and me. Not ours to “grow faint or be crushed until we have established justice in the earth.” The justice that is human – giving each man, woman and child what they can claim as a right: adequate food, decent housing, fitting education, humane work, adequate insurance, respect for their dignity as images of God. The justice that is divine – a justice that inspires us to love even our enemies, as Jesus has loved us. A justice that makes our own the mission of Jesus: “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because God has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. Has sent me to proclaim release for prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind. To send the downtrodden away reassured.”

*Servant.* In doing justice, we take as spoken to us the words of Jesus to the Twelve: “You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great ones are tyrants over them. It will not be so among you. But whoever wishes to be great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be your slave. Just as the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many.” Such is our privilege as disciples of Jesus.

The problem is, it isn’t easy to see ourselves as servants. Most of us do not seem called to so radical a life style. There are indeed servants of justice who live like that. Dorothy Day did. Archbishop Romero. Mother Teresa. What all of us are called to, I believe, is to share *in some way* the suffering of the less privileged. Which brings me to the third demand.

*Suffering.* As I look back over 68 years of life, I can hardly claim to have suffered. Oh yes, I have agonized over the death of my father, over homilies, over affronts to my pride. But not the suffering that afflicts parents whose children are hungry, the suffering that wastes the cancer-ridden, the suffering that agonizes the homeless and the hopeless, the suffering that torments the drug-addicted, the afflictions of flesh and spirit that threaten to dehumanize God's images on earth.

And still, if I am to preach effectively on human injustice, I have to experience to some extent, I have to at least feel deeply, the agony of the crucified. Simply, I must experience what the Gospels keep repeating about Jesus: "He had compassion." Not pity. For pity looks down on another from a higher place. No. Compassion means I feel what another feels. I put myself in a brother's or sister's shoes. I *am* my brother. I *am* my sister.

Listen to a note from one of our parishioners: "I am extremely happy to have a Catholic Church right down the street from where I live, downtown where the message can reach the people who need it the most, and still have a solid backing of regular middle-class parishioners. I firmly believe that, with support and not just "help," people who are down-and-out can get back on their feet and be once more productive. Thank you, Christ Our Hope, for being here."

Or from a visitor: "Sharing the celebration of Mass with the poor, the wealthy and every spot in between, I felt that if there were ever a place where Jesus would actually attend Mass with his followers, it would be at Christ Our Hope."

Have I strayed from Jesus' baptism? Not really. My own baptism reveals my identity, tells the world who I am. I am, like Jesus, a servant sent to suffer for justice. And when I do, then the heavens open again, then the Holy Spirit descends dove-like, then the Father declares with pride, "You are my son, my daughter, whom I love. With you I am well pleased."

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