

# Homily – Baptism of the Lord (C)

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*Is. 40: 1-5, 9-11; Titus 2: 11-14, 3: 4-7 & Lk.3: 15-16, 21-22*

Many of you will probably be aware that this great feast of the Baptism of the Lord which we celebrate today, and with which we bring to a close the season of Christmastide, is a fairly recent addition to our liturgical calendar. Until 1955, when Pius XII added it to the calendar, there was no separate celebration of the Baptism. Pius situated the feast on the 13<sup>th</sup> January, the Octave Day of the Epiphany, and it remained there until the more thorough-going revision of the Missal and the Lectionary after Vatican II, when Paul VI moved it to its current location on the Sunday following the Epiphany. This seemingly strange omission from the old calendar does not mean that the event commemorated was considered trivial or unimportant. Indeed, along with the Adoration of the Magi and the Wedding Feast at Canaan, Jesus' first miracle in John's Gospel, it was one of the three great "theophanies" or revelations of Jesus' divine and saving action commemorated on the feast of the Epiphany itself – three episodes recounted in the great Vespers antiphon "*Tribus miraculis*" which is still sung today, and also in the Epiphany hymn. In the West, however, the emphasis of popular piety shifted the focus of the Epiphany more and more towards the visit of the Wise Men and their gift-giving, leaving the other two aspects of the feast increasingly overshadowed. This year, in fact, we are particularly blessed, since next week's Gospel is the Wedding Feast at Canaan, so we will have heard all three of those great revelations, those great theophanies, read in sequence at our Sunday Eucharist.

So what has today's celebration of Jesus' baptism got to teach us? Luke's account of the event is very spartan, very brief, especially when compared with Matthew's gospel. There is the account of John's witness to the coming Messiah – as much to allay popular expectation that he, John, was the Christ – and his prophecy of Jesus baptising with the Holy Spirit and with fire, a prophecy fulfilled on the day of Pentecost. And then comes Luke's slightly strange description: "*and while Jesus, after his own baptism was at prayer, heaven opened and the Holy Spirit descended on him in bodily shape, like a dove. And there came a voice from heaven...*" Luke seems to be emphasising two key points. The first is that the great revelation – the Dove and the Voice, the Spirit and the Father attesting to the Son – occurs not in the Jordan, not at the moment of baptism, but later, while Jesus was "at prayer". It is characteristic of Luke's portrait of Jesus that he is, above all, a man of prayer, a man who seeks the lonely places throughout his life so that he can spend time in prayer, spend time in communion with his Father. It is, perhaps, fitting then that this first revelation of the adult Jesus as Son occurs while he is at prayer. It is as if it is in this prayer that the Trinity is wholly present, wholly united, wholly active – preparing to burst forth into the waiting world.

The second key element to which Luke points our attention is the Voice from heaven, saying: "You are my Son, the Beloved; my favour rests on you". Those words are very

familiar to us, indeed they are echoed in the great prayer with which we began Mass this morning. I suspect, though, that – as ever with the familiar – we get them confused with the later Voice heard at the Transfiguration in the centre of Luke’s narrative. There, the words are a divine attestation of Jesus’ nature: *“This is my Son, the Beloved; listen to him!”* (Lk. 9:35). Here, though, they are subtly different; they are not a public attestation but a personal address: *You* are my Beloved Son; my favour rests on *you*. It is an intimate address, the words of Father to Son, words spoken in the eternal love of the Spirit. They are like the intimate words we heard from the prophet Isaiah in our first reading, God speaking to the heart of Jerusalem to promise salvation, drawing his flock back to his heart and leading them to new pastures. It is the intimacy of this personal address that Jesus in some way comes to know who he is – and it is perhaps no surprise that this moment of self-discovery, this moment of awakening identity, this moment of intimacy should come while he is at prayer.

Tomorrow, with the ending of the Christmas season, we return to “Ordinary Time” in the Church’s year. Yet, as Paul describes in that passage from the letter to Titus, that coming time for us is anything but ordinary – *for God’s grace has been revealed, and it has made salvation possible for the whole human race* (Tit. 2:11). This time of grace, of our ordinary discipleship is rooted in the mystery of the Incarnation which we have celebrated, teaching us to give up everything that does not lead to God... teaching us to be God’s very own people with *no ambition except to do good* (Tit.2:14). And perhaps that is why Luke’s portrait of Jesus’ baptism is potentially so powerful for us, for it reminds us that – if our discipleship is to have any worth and any fruitfulness – it must be grounded in prayer, just as Jesus’ was. In prayer, Jesus found the Trinity deeply alive and active in him – and so can we. In prayer, Jesus found a true intimacy with his Father – and so can we. In prayer, Jesus found who he *really* was – the Son, the Beloved – and so too can we.

Our prayer does not need to be long and complex – indeed, as St Benedict says, better short and pure, frequent and from the heart. And if we are short of inspiration, or find ourselves distracted, we could all gain much from reflecting on the prayers and readings for today’s Mass – so that, in the words of the alternative Collect for today: *we may be inwardly transformed, through him whom we recognise as outwardly like ourselves.* Amen.

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