

The world outside these doors may have moved on from Christmas a couple of weeks ago but we're just now celebrating the end of the Christmas season. Over the past few weeks, we heard stories about Jesus while He was a child. Like last Sunday, we heard how the Magi visited the child Jesus and presented Him with gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. It's fitting that the Church wraps up our Christmas season with today's Feast of the Baptism of the Lord. We begin the transition into Ordinary Time by leaving the stories of the child Jesus behind. We jump ahead about 30 years to an adult Jesus being baptized by John the Baptist in the Jordan River.

Jesus' baptism is an important event in His life that carries with it profound significance. It marks His transition out of obscurity and into the spotlight. Before He came to the banks of the Jordan River and was announced by John as the Messiah, Jesus was largely unknown. His baptism put an end to His hidden life and thrust Him into public ministry – His three years on this earth preaching, healing, and saving.

Whenever this event comes up, the question usually arises, especially during RCIA, "Since Jesus was sinless, why was He baptized?" It's true that John preached a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. And, in no way, did Jesus need to be baptized. The hundreds, maybe thousands, of people lined up on the banks of the Jordan River needed to be baptized. Jesus chose to be baptized.

The water of the Jordan River that day was filled with sins of all kinds as the people came to repent. It was filled with every imaginable evil, with all kinds of human immorality. The religious leaders of that time refused to step foot in such water. They didn't want to be seen with sinners. Even more, they felt they had no need for repentance and washing. But Jesus wasn't ashamed to step into the water. He stood in line, shoulder to shoulder with the sinners, for his turn to be baptized by John.

Jesus' public ministry began with an act of compassion and solidarity with all of us who are in need of healing. He took upon Himself all of our burdens and sins. He set aside all exemption for Himself and allowed Himself to be numbered among sinners. Even though He had no need to be cleansed from sin, Jesus took our place. In turn, when we're baptized, we're called to take His place. He became like us so we could become like Him.

That day, the Holy Spirit was seen descending in the form of a dove and the Father was heard saying, "You are my beloved Son; with you I am well pleased." In baptism, we're freed from original sin and made into temples of the Holy Spirit. We too are named by the Father. We're all given the same name, child of God, to signify our oneness with God and our unity with one another in God. God says to each one of us, "You are my beloved daughter. You are my beloved son." We become heirs of heaven and we receive this gift not because of anything we've done or merited. We receive this gift according to His mercy.

Even though we receive baptism only once in our lifetime, it's not a one-time event. It's not a simple rite or milestone. It's a transforming experience in which God lives in us and we live in God. We become empowered by God's grace to live and keep our baptismal promises throughout our lives. Our faith is meant to be a sincere, enthusiastic, and ongoing response to the incredible truth that God, who is the creator and sustainer of everything that exists, has come among us as one of us.

What we sometimes miss though is that our Baptism makes us part of the mission and the work of Jesus Christ. We tend to forget that. Jesus' baptism in the Jordan wasn't a private moment of revelation but a public commissioning to the work of redemption. Likewise, our Baptism, and all the sacraments for that matter, is not simply a private, spiritual event but a public commissioning to do God's work.

The institutional presence of the Church is expressed in official statements and councils. But there's another presence of the Church that exists wherever Christians live. If we're there, then the Church is there. Because we're baptized Christians, Christ has in us spokespersons where we work, with our friends, and in our family. As Pope Pius XII said many years ago, in Baptism "we don't merely belong to the Church, we are the Church." That's a strong statement and a powerful truth. Through Baptism, we are the Church.

People change careers. Relationships come and go. People move from place to place. We all go through many changes in our lives from health to sickness, from wealth to less wealth or vice versa. What endures is the mission we received in our Baptism to be representatives of Christ in our world. The mission given to us in Baptism remains with us throughout our entire lifetime.

Brothers and sisters, the day of our Baptism is the most important day of our life, no matter how many years God gives us. Because it's on this day that we began the great adventure of faith and love in the Lord. For me, that day was March 25<sup>th</sup>, 1989 at St. Michael Catholic Church on Summer Avenue when I was baptized during the Easter Vigil by Fr. John Atkinson, may God rest his soul.

No matter what great things may happen to us over the course of our lifetime, nothing is more important. No matter what misfortunes we may encounter, nothing can take that great dignity and destiny away, except mortal sin. St. Louis IX, King of France in the 13<sup>th</sup> century, considered it a greater honor to be a child of God than to be the ruler of a kingdom. He said, "The earthly kingdom I shall lose at death; but the other will be my passport to everlasting glory."

Today, on this Feast, we remember the Baptism of the Lord, the public embrace of His mission from the Father, and His solidarity with the human race. We also recall our own Baptism when the heavens opened, the Holy Spirit descended upon us, and we were commissioned to do God's work. Whatever else comes and goes in our life, the commission to do the work of God lasts as long as we do.

In God's eyes, the deepest truth about our life is our baptismal call. What we've done with that call, with that grace, will be the source of our glory or our indictment in God's sight. If that mission of our Baptism has been dormant, this year is a good time to bring it back to life. Are you living your baptismal call so that at the end of your life you may hear the Father say, "With you I am well pleased. Welcome home."?