

Sermon - 10th January, 2021

The Baptism of the Lord

May I speak in the name of God: Father, Son, and Holy Ghost. Amen.

The liturgical time following Christmas is ultimately one extended meditation on how the earthly life of Christ is an epiphany—how the Incarnation as manifested throughout Christ's ministry, in its various moments, is, in its entirety, all one shining forth of God's Truth and glory into the world, in and through him, for us to recognize and be transformed by.

And so, the epiphany is not just about the visit of the wise men from the east but also includes the Baptism of Jesus in the river Jordan by John the Baptist. Also included in this epiphany of Christ is the visit of Jesus, as a twelve-year-old, to the temple of Jerusalem, where the learned doctors were astonished by his understanding and his answers. Also included are the various miracles that Jesus performs, from his first sign in John's Gospel of changing water into wine at the marriage feast in Cana of Galilee to the healing of lepers and maimed and the calming of the troubled sea in the other Gospels leading his disciples to ask, "Who is this, that even the sea and the wind obey him?"

Today, Jesus inaugurates his public activity described in today's Gospel by stepping into the place of sinners. In the Orthodox Church, this is the Feast of the Epiphany, not the visit of the Magi, this moment from the Gospels where we find an explicit manifestation of 2 of 5 God as Trinity, a window into the fullness of the love that God is through the baptism of our Lord.

Of course, the glaring question when we encounter the baptism of Jesus is always: What, on earth, is Jesus doing here blending into the gray mass of sinners on the banks of the Jordan waiting to be baptized by John?

The Baptism offered by John the Baptist, after all, was a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.

And so, knowing the purpose of John's baptism, the fact that Jesus came to him to be baptized naturally raises questions. Did Jesus need to undergo a conversion? Did he need to be cleansed and purified?

Mark's Gospel, like Luke's, doesn't do much to answer these questions in their account of Jesus' baptism. Matthew, in contrast, has a bit more to say. In Matthew, John the Baptist protests as soon as Jesus comes to be baptized by him. Matthew tells us that John saw the problem that we have raised: initially, John cannot understand why Jesus is submitting to baptism for sinners. As a result, we are told, John would have prevented Jesus, saying, "I need to be baptized by you, and you come to me?" But Jesus answers him, "Let it be so now, for it is proper for us in this way to fulfil all righteousness." And so, Matthew gives us a further piece of the puzzle to begin to make sense of Jesus' baptism.

Jesus needs to be baptized in order to 'fulfil all righteousness. What does this mean though? We can understand righteousness to be the acceptance of the whole of God's will, 3 of 5 righteousness to be an unrestricted 'Yes' to God, righteousness, a willingness to take on the yoke of one's calling by God in the most complete possible way.

In Jesus' case, he fulfils all righteousness by accepting the whole of God's will, by giving his unrestricted 'Yes' to the will of the Father, by giving himself fully to take on the yoke of what he has been called to do in the fullest possible way.

And the way that he 'fulfils all righteousness,' the way that he takes on the yoke of God's will for his life is by entering into the place of sinful people. Even though he is without sin, even though there is nothing he needs to leave behind to be who he truly is, or who he has been called to be, even though he does not need cleansing and purification, Jesus enters into John's baptism for the forgiveness of sins.

So much has been made in recent days of the lack of solidarity of some of our elected leaders with the struggles of ordinary people.

But, in contrast, in the moment of Christ's baptism, we see God's solidarity with us, we glimpse God's desire to dwell with us here on earth where we are and we also catch a glimpse of God as everlasting love, whose own eternal life of love shared between Father, Son and Holy Spirit, we are invited to enter into through Christ by God's grace by our own baptism. At the very moment that Jesus publicly draws near to sinful humanity by his baptism, here is made up what was lacking in John's baptism: the inaccessible heavens are opened we are told, the Holy Spirit descends upon him in bodily form like a dove, and a voice from heaven addresses Jesus and says, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you, I am well pleased."

The use of 'like' to refer to the manifestation of the Holy Spirit suggests that this is a simile for something that ultimately cannot be described. And yet, the notion of the Holy Spirit resting upon him 'like a dove', brings to mind the Spirit hovering over the face of the waters at creation; and it brings to mind the dove bearing the olive leaf which brought word to Noah that the floodwaters of God's judgment of humanity's wickedness had receded. The beginning of Christ's ministry at his baptism then is the moment that brings creation to its fulfilment and that brings word that God's judgment of our human waywardness has been dealt with by him; by him coming to us and joining with us where we are. The announcement from heaven about Jesus as God's beloved also speaks to us of the final goal of all human life, the purpose for which we were created: to become Sons and Daughters, God's beloved children, with whom God is well pleased, now made possible in Christ. And so this revelation of God as Trinity is also a revelation of our own vocation.

Christ came to us so that we might become like him. This is why the life-giving, transforming Holy Spirit has been poured out upon the church: so that we might be reborn and made new so that we might be able to claim our special dignity as children of God who please the unseen Father in heaven as Christ, the Son does from all eternity. This is why we enter into the waters of baptism ourselves in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit; to be joined to Christ as he is joined to us; to be washed clean of our sinfulness, to be brought back on track through him, to be

a given a fresh start, to be given the gift of new life, eternal life, to know God's love now and forever.

The turning of the calendar at the beginning of the New Year is always a time to reflect upon fresh starts: about what we would like to see a change in our lives in the upcoming year. Experience teaches us how hard it can be to change things for the better on our own. We are often weak-willed and resistant to embarking on a different path than the one we are comfortable with.

And yet, we are called, each of us, to grow, to change, to choose to do God's will and so to become more Christ-like by God's grace received in our own baptism, renewed throughout our earthly pilgrimages.

And so, today's Gospel is an invitation to us to ask: What needs to change? How do I need to grow? Where do I need to leave my past way of doing things behind in order to live out the new life that Christ has offered to me?

Our Lord's descent into the river Jordan assures us this day that God is with us precisely in the predicament we find ourselves as sinners, lifting each us up from all that we need to be cleansed from to show us our unique dignity as children of God.

May we, therefore, pray for the grace to put our trust in God's great love for us this day and always and so be transformed, more and more, into Christ's likeness. Amen.