

Baptism of the Lord

When you stop and think that there had not been a prophet in Israel like John the Baptist for more than 500 years, it helps to form an impression of how high the expectations were among the people that God was doing something mighty important right then in their day and age.

And then, to heighten the expectation even further, John made it quite clear that there was no comparison between him and the one for whom he was preparing the way: “I am not worthy to loosen the thongs of his sandals” was how he put it.

But today’s readings present Jesus in a very humble light. Luke simply writes of Jesus’ baptism: “After all the people had been baptized and Jesus also had been baptized and was praying, The Holy Spirit descended upon him...and a voice came from heaven, “You are my beloved Son; with you I am well pleased.”

Knowing that there were still disciples of John on into the time when Luke was writing his gospel, Luke must have found it difficult to acknowledge that Jesus had been baptized by John, because that would highlight a question that still was making the rounds: “If Jesus was greater than John, why did he submit to John’s baptism? Should it have been the other way around?”

If John’s baptism was a baptism of repentance, why didn’t Jesus just forego receiving it? It’s not like there

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was any obligation to do so as far as the law is concerned. It was more like a pious practice along the lines of receiving ashes on Ash Wednesday. A good thing to do, but no one is obligated to.

What started out as John's baptism gets transformed by Jesus' participation in it. He undergoes it as an act of solidarity with all those who need repentance and remission of sins, but once Jesus has been baptized and the heavens are opened and the Holy Spirit descends on him, there's so much more going on: baptism becomes the entryway into the life of the Spirit, with forgiveness of sins being the "opening act," so to speak.

That's not always what's in the forefront of our minds, though, when we celebrate baptism. In the minds of many, the predominant image of baptism is that it's a guarantee that the one being baptized will not end up in limbo

How we celebrate the sacrament has something to do with that. It's become more of a pouring of water rather than a going down into it and rising up again.

And it's the rising up again that's in the forefront of the reading today. Jesus goes down into the water in solidarity with everyone in need of reconciliation with God, but it's in the coming up out of the water that the main event unfolds: the Holy Spirit being bestowed on the one being baptized.

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Even if we don't hear the words "this is my beloved son/daughter, that's basically what God is saying with the gift of baptism. He is giving us a share in what Jesus has and his adopted sisters and brothers.

Baptism is primarily about what God is doing, and that is the most fundamental rationale for presenting children for baptism. That's why it's not repeatable. Even if we acknowledge that, at some point, the one being baptized with have to make a conscious decision to take the grace of baptism out of its wrappings and put it into practice, the desire of God to adopt us into his own family precedes any decision we make about it one way or another.

The words of the prophet Isaiah really apply to all of us who have been adopted in this way: "I, the Lord, have called you for the victory of justice, I have grasped you by the hand; I formed you, and set you as a covenant of the people, a light for the nations, to open the eyes of the blind, to bring prisoners out from confinement, and from the dungeons, those who live in darkness."

Wow! What dignity God has invested us with! What promise! What mission! It remains open how this reality will unfold in the lives of each of us, but who can doubt that if we are open to receive the grace that God has in store for us, good things will come of it.

It's really not about sin. It's about grace. It's about

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celebrating that grace in the liturgy of our lives.

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1. John the Baptism was a sensation! Heightened expectations
2. Still, no comparison with who was to come: : *“I am not worthy to loosen the thongs of his sandals”*
3. Luke portrays Jesus very humbly: : *“After all the people had been baptized and Jesus also had been baptized and was praying, The Holy Spirit descended upon him...and a voice came from heaven, “You are my beloved Son; with you I am well pleased.”*
4. Jesus’ motivation: solidarity; a further consequence of the Incarnation. No need for a baptism of repentance, but there was much more going on than that.
5. Baptism gets transformed by Jesus’ participation in it; becomes the occasion for the descent of the H.S. Forgiveness of sins is just the “opening act.”
6. May not be how we think of it. More a guarantee against ending up in limbo.

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7. Changing how we celebrate baptism could help; could we bring out the dying and rising aspect better? The going down into the water and the rising up out of it?
8. The rising up out of the water lies at the forefront today. The main event unfolds with Jesus rising up out of the water: the Holy Spirit descends.
9. True of our baptism, too, even without the divine voice speaking. The intent: “this is my beloved Son/Daughter. God is giving us a share in what Jesus has.
10. Baptism is primarily about what God is doing, therefore not repeatable. An expression of God’s desire to have us in his own family; this precedes any decision on our part.
11. Isaiah’s words apply to all of us who have been adopted in this way: *“I, the Lord, have called you for the victory of justice, I have grasped you by the hand; I formed you, and set you as a covenant of the people, a light for the nations, to open the eyes of the blind, to bring prisoners out from confinement, and from the dungeons, those who live in darkness.”*

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12. Wow! What dignity has been invested in us! What promise! What mission! Why knows how this will play out in our individual lives. No question that good will come of it, though.

13. It's really not about sin, but about grace, and how that gets celebrated in the liturgy of our lives.