

Baptism of the Lord 2013

Today on the feast of the Baptism of the Lord we are being reminded once again of the fundamental and central place of baptism in the history of salvation and in our lives as Christians. Having said that, however, I have to tell you that there is a problem with it. The problem, put very simply, is that we Catholics often no longer know how to live as a *baptismal* people. We often no longer live, so to speak, *out of our baptisms*, or we don't see the connection between what happens in baptism and our lives afterwards. If the statistics in the United States are anything to go by, we are doing a really bad job of communicating to people how life in the Church is what follows from being baptized in the Church. The last statistic I read was that 23 million people baptized in the Catholic Church have left.

The majority of that 23 million has decided that they need to live out their lives as Christians within some Christian community other than the Catholic Church. Tragically, however, the number of people who simply leave the Christian community altogether, and so abandon their baptismal covenant altogether, is increasing. That's what the latest report from the Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life about the so-called "nones" showed us. One-fifth of the U.S. public – and a third of adults under 30 – are religiously unaffiliated today, the highest percentages ever the Pew Forum started polling.

Statistics and numbers are certainly not everything, but they do tell us something important. And they challenge us- all of us- with regard to our own authenticity and integrity. The obvious question that we should be asking and leading those baptized as

infants to ask when they are able is: What difference does baptism make in my life? What difference does being a baptized human being make? Where does baptism take me?.

For us Catholics, as well as for Orthodox, Anglicans, Lutherans and many other Christians, baptism is certainly God's work. That's what we mean when we insist that Baptism is a means of grace, a conferral of the life of God's Kingdom. That is absolutely true. But baptism is also the beginning of God's covenant with us, and God's covenant always propels us *towards life in this world*, towards a particular kind of *life for the rest of our lives*. And to do this, as St. Paul once wrote, we need "to put on Christ".

This, then, relates to the central question that the Baptism of the Lord raises for us: what was Jesus doing when he went down to the Jordan and was plunged into the waters? If we are to have a sense of what our own baptisms mean and what it is for us to "put on Christ", then somehow we need to have a sense of what was happening to Jesus when he himself was baptized in the Jordan. There are, of course, various ways of answering this question, but at its heart, I believe, there is something powerfully embodied in today's feast that we have been celebrating in various ways since Christmas- the Word of God, the Lord of heaven and earth, the Wisdom of Yahweh- however we want to talk about him- has come into our midst and has plunged himself into our reality. The Baptism of the Lord is about God stepping out of God's ineffable, transcendent brightness or darkness and being hurled, being plunged, into *our* life.

Ever since Christmas we have been celebrating this in ever-deepening circles. At the Nativity, God was plunged into our material, physical bodily existence. At the coming of

the Wise men and the escape into Egypt, God was plunged into our political life on earth among refugees hounded by Herod's troops. At the Circumcision, God was plunged into our religious world which is trying to bind together once again through a covenant between God and human beings things that have been broken apart; and this has always somehow needed blood-letting to do that. At the baptism in the Jordan, God is now plunged into a place of sin and repentance, a place of turning around back to God, in order somehow to fulfill, as John's gospel reading says, to fulfill "all justice".

In these ever-deepening circles of plunging that we have been celebrating over the past few weeks, what we see is God identifying himself increasingly ever more deeply with us and with a reality which is other than who and what God is. And what God has begun here will go on and on until on Good Friday and Holy Saturday it reaches the end, the fullest identification with us and with our plight.

What does all of this tell us about "putting on Christ" that our own baptisms invite and challenge us to do so that we can engage in a new way of living? At the heart of the Baptism of Jesus and at the heart of our own baptisms is a plunging that took God and that takes us out of and away from our places of security and safety and throws us headlong in a world of vulnerability and chaos. Why? So that God, and so that we, can find ourselves with "the other", the ones different, the ones broken and failing, the ones who know they can no longer boast about their achievements, the ones who know they are deviant, peculiar, mismatched and contrary. The Baptism of Jesus is the celebration that God has thrown himself into a world of "otherness" in order to find the

lost, the crippled and the cracked and to give them life, to give them the life of God's Kingdom.

The Baptism of the Lord is in a real sense the overturning of the energy and the dynamism of all religion, which is the fundamental human search to find God and to make ourselves acceptable, pleasing to God. Jesus' baptism is opposite. It's about the energy and the dynamism of God plunging God into the mess of our reality and of our lives so that God can find *us*, identify *with us*, be "at home" *with us*, not when we are at our best or at our most pious and most dutiful, not in our beauty or our success or our power. God comes to us in our mess and ugliness and failings. And God comes close not so that he can wag his finger in our faces, but he comes as friend and companion and fellow-traveler. Perhaps the first and the greatest accusation made against Jesus, which eventually led to the cross, were, as I said last Sunday, the words, "This guy welcomes sinners and eats with them".

"This guy welcomes sinners and eats with them"- this is the heart of divine plunging at the Baptism of the Lord, which continued unrelentingly throughout Jesus' ministry as he fed the poor, gave crazy people a new life, partied with sinners, talked theology with women and heretics, and praised the faith of even a pagan Roman soldier. In Jesus, God's identification with us in our weakness, in our brokenness, in our failures, and in our mess was so great that religious people would have to hurt him, beat him and finally kill him, because what Jesus said that God was doing was so fantastic, so explosive, and so subversive to how we usually look at things that we had to get rid of this man. It is genuinely hard for religious people to accept that maybe it's God who is at work

overturning our ideas about good guys and bad guys. In the gospels, even John the Baptizer balked at baptizing Jesus- the order of goodness and badness meant that he shouldn't be doing that. In Luke's gospel that we heard today, John says, "I am baptizing you with water, but one mightier than I is coming. I am not worthy to loosen the thongs of his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire." In John's gospel, John the Baptizer says that Jesus is the "just one"; so, he should be doing the baptizing. But Jesus would have none of that, "Baptize me", he says, "because it is proper for us in this way to fulfill all justice".

If Jesus' baptism is about God's refusal to remain in his glorious perfection and beauty and otherness and being willing to make his home with us, then our own baptisms and our "putting on of Christ" calls us to a similar task and vocation. Above all else, Christians should be known not for their desire to establish conventions and walled fortresses of self-purity and self-righteousness. We should be known for a divine purity that is ready to *go to the other*, to enter the mess of the other, to live with mercy, that is, to be willing to enter the chaos of the other so that he or she can meet a God who saves and redeems, who liberates captives and who heals the broken-hearted. One of the most powerful and startling patristic texts that describes the new energy and the new dynamism of what the baptized community of God looks like comes from St. Isaac of Nineveh in the 6th century:

*Do not distinguish between the worthy and the unworthy;
All must be equal in your eyes to love and serve.
Did not the Lord share the table of publicans and prostitutes,
Without putting the unworthy away from him? (Ascetic Treatises, 23)*

Once we finally get this, and understand that this is what baptism, both Jesus' baptism and our own, is about, and that this is what our "putting on Christ" in baptism concretely means and looks like- that we begin to live and to deal with others differently- then perhaps those who have left the Church may once again be able to hear and to see and to taste the Good News that we keep talk about.