

The Baptism of Christ

St Martha's, Bethany Beach

January 10, 2021

Genesis 1:1-5

Psalm 29

Acts 19:1-7

Mark 1:4-11

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

What is the one thing that all or most of us at St Martha's have in common? It is our baptism - which is something we also share with our Lord Jesus Christ. Today we celebrate our Lord's own baptism by John in the Jordan river. In the gospel of Mark, the baptism of Christ signals the end of the work of John the Baptist and the beginning of the public life and ministry of Jesus. This great beginning culminates in the glorious acclamation of approval when God the Father, as a voice from heaven utters: "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased."

The baptism of Christ is the first revelation of his divinity, a theophany of Father, Son and Holy Spirit. "And just as he was coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on him." This is the Holy Spirit, the gift of God at Baptism, which we receive when we are baptized in Christ. The dove is a special sign indicating the presence of the Spirit and symbolizes purity, peace and wisdom.

Much later in Jesus' life there is another theophany, where the Holy Trinity is manifest and Jesus' divinity is allowed to shine in all its glory. This is the Transfiguration, when the Holy Spirit appears as the dazzling light surrounding Jesus.

Even from the beginning, the Holy Spirit is there, moving over the waters at the beginning of creation. Jesus' mother Mary conceives through the Holy Spirit. Later, when Mary visits her cousin Elizabeth and greets her, we hear that the child, the future John the Baptist, leapt in Elizabeth's womb. "And Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit."

What or who, then, is this Holy Spirit, which appears at these key moments in the life of Jesus, and of which we hear again in the letters of St Paul? It is simply the power and presence of God at work in the world. And he works in a particular way, have you noticed? He is at work in the hearts and minds of individual men and women. The Holy Spirit manifests God's power, which is given to individuals, effecting and directing change from within.

Need we say again what this power is? Yes, we do. This is the power of love, of mercy, and of forgiveness. This is the irresistible power which can penetrate and transform all aspects of human life, if we let it. The only obstacles are our stubbornness and pride. Baptism is a stage in dealing with all of that. It is a public event which expresses externally what God is doing internally in our lives. Baptism washes away sin and makes us into new people called Christians. John began this work and Christ expanded it. John says, "I have baptized you with water, but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit." John acknowledges Jesus' power when he says "The one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to stoop down and untie the thong of his sandals."

"I am not worthy." Those words of John the Baptist, full of humility and truth, are given as a guide for us. The words capture the essence of a man who was truly God's servant, who feared God and served him in all righteousness. In turn God blessed him with the gift of

prophecy. John lived in the wilderness, was clothed with camel's hair and ate locusts and wild honey. He was not at home in the temple or the synagogue. The desert floor was his bed; the sky his roof. John was something of an outsider, as we would understand it.

Among the many voices at this time claiming to speak on behalf of God, John's is the authentic one. His wild appearance did not constitute a barrier to the message he was proclaiming. John was the herald, the forerunner; he was preparing the ground for Jesus' coming. From John we hear the clear direction to repent, which remains true today: to accept Jesus into your life, first you must repent. What that means is to acknowledge your lack of power to permanently change the way you are: sinful, selfish, proud. To deny that is merely proof that it has taken deep root within you.

Before we receive the "yes" of Jesus we make conscious and deliberate the "no" to all that corrupts and distorts our true nature. We say "no" to the things that diminish and demean us: the lies, the badmouthing of others, the lack of loving. We stand before Jesus as a sinful penitent, ashamed of what we have become. Then we ask Jesus to help us, to lead us, to heal us. Only he can do this, and he does it all through the power of the Holy Spirit.

This is the source of our rejoicing, which becomes worship because it is God who, through his loving power, brings it about. We cannot claim the credit. John didn't. He had followers who would have stuck with him had he not pointed the way to Jesus. John, the righteous man of God, a better specimen than either you or me, was "not worthy to stoop down and untie the thong of Jesus' sandal."

We cannot claim the credit for the forgiveness of sins, but we can experience something of God's power, either immediately or as a wave that spreads out from its source to wash away our preoccupation with ourselves and submerge us, however briefly, in the life of the Spirit.

In the end, God's power is an overwhelming power, a force to be reckoned with, for all dominions and empires will fall before it, all human work and life will be gathered up into it, transformed and redeemed by it according to God's ultimate plan for the universe. As such, it is ultimately irresistible, so to accept God's power is to become part of the solution, instead of being part of the problem. Remember again where we start: with repentance, with self-examination - our conscience helps us to do this.

Following the act of repentance, say "yes" to Jesus, to the power of the Holy Spirit, to the belief that the Spirit can change you and make you a better person. Although baptism is a once and only event, in every Eucharist we renew the action of baptism by confessing our sins and receiving absolution. As St Paul says, we were baptized into Jesus' death, so that we might walk in newness of life.

What is the basis of this new life into which we are baptized? Repentance of sins, and dependence on the Holy Spirit. This is the summary of our new life in Christ. Through baptism we are reborn in the Spirit and remain dependent on God's grace. We are a "work in progress", but a joyful one, because of what Christ has done for us. Let us praise our God, therefore, and submit to the irresistible power which can cleanse, heal and remake all aspects of our life, if we let it.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Father David Beresford