

THE FEAST OF BAPTISM OF OUR LORD-2021

READINGS: Isaiah 42: 1-4, 6-7;

Responsorial Psalm-Psalm 29;

Acts 10: 34-38;

Gospel of Mark 1: 7-11

One baptism, one faith, one people

The celebration of the Christmas Season comes to an end with the celebration of another important event-- the Feast of Baptism of Jesus. We all have some understanding of our own baptism especially of baptism of babies. However, the Church has provided us with three readings that invite us to reflect on the spiritual significance of our baptism in the context of Jesus' baptism. We begin with the Gospel reading from Mark. This passage overlaps with the passage we read on the Second Sunday of Advent. We read about a type of baptism that John the Baptist performed. The word "baptism" was a ritual that unbelievers who were coming into the Jewish faith had to do: wash to be clean enough to be God's people. However, John the Baptist was baptizing Jews who already had embraced the Jewish faith. The people considered the baptism of John the Baptist as special and therefore they thought John the Baptist was the expected messiah. However, John the Baptist made it known that he was not the Messiah by referring to Jesus as "the one coming after me". John the Baptist described Jesus with the expression, "he would baptize with the Holy Spirit" to reveal the divinity of Jesus. The mission of John the Baptist was to bring people to repentance. In the celebration of baptism, John the Baptist offered his people the opportunity to transform their lives so that they could prepare for the coming of the Lord.

Today's passage focuses on the baptism of Jesus. Jesus came from Nazareth to be baptized by John the Baptist. At the celebration of baptism of Jesus, there were some manifestations of the presence of God: the heavens torn apart implying a vision of heavenly secrets. The Holy Spirit descended in the form of a dove on Jesus. God revealed himself when he spoke about Jesus, "You are my Son, the Beloved, with you I am well pleased".

In the beginning of Mark's Gospel, the Evangelist describes Jesus as "the Son of God". Mark used an Old Testament event to describe the identity of Jesus. Mark quoted from Psalm 2, referred to as a royal Psalm: "The Lord said to me, you are my son: this day I have begotten you". Over time, the Psalm was understood by Scripture scholars to express Israel's hope for a messiah. The Psalm continues by describing the "son" as the "anointed". In the Bible the words "messiah" and "Christ" both mean "the anointed". Psalm 2 became an expression of messianic hope. The Evangelist used the words "the Son of God" to teach that Jesus is the fulfillment of that messianic hope. Mark also used Jewish Scriptures to describe the significance of the Holy Spirit that descended on Jesus at his baptism. Throughout the Bible many extraordinary accomplishments reveal the presence of the Spirit, the life-power of God, from creation to the appearance of the messianic king.

So, what does it mean for the “Son of God”-the Messiah, the Christ, to be baptized? This question leads us into the first reading from the Book of the Prophet Isaiah. Today’s passage is part of the Book of Isaiah written by the prophet known as “Deutero-Isaiah” or “Second Isaiah”, who lived during the time of the Babylonian exile. The passage begins, “Thus says the Lord. ‘Here is my servant whom I behold’”. The servant about whom the prophet is speaking is thought to be the suffering nation of Israel, or an unnamed person or the prophet himself. The exile was a painful time for the Israelites. They wondered if God was with them. They wondered if they were still God’s chosen people. The prophet offered hope to the exiles by assuring them that God was with them despite their suffering.

How are we supposed to interpret the first reading and the Gospel passage? Today’s first reading from Isaiah is one of the four Suffering Servant Songs. The suffering servant is described as a servant who opens the eyes of the blind and establishes justice. When Mark pictured God speaking of Jesus as the Beloved Son of God, he was teaching that Jesus is the suffering servant in the first reading. When we read today’s Gospel passage in the context of what we celebrate today, then we can relate the mission of the newly baptized Jesus to the mission of the servant in today’s first reading. Jesus is the person who is going to end people’s suffering. His ministry of saving the poor and the suffering begins with his baptism.

How do the readings reflect what we are celebrating today-- the baptism of Jesus? The baptism that John offered to Jesus was the same type of baptism that he offered to the people for repentance. We might wonder if Jesus needed to repent. We might wonder why Jesus needed to be baptized. In fact in the Gospel of Matthew, we read that John the Baptist acknowledged that Jesus should be the one who was to baptize John. Jesus nevertheless offered himself to be baptized by John.

So, what does Jesus’ baptism mean to us? The baptism of Jesus is an expression of his fundamental submission to the will of the Father and his complete identification with sinners. The retired Pope Benedict XVI describes Jesus’s baptism as his solidarity with us as “with our efforts to convert and to be rid of our selfishness, to break away from our sins in order to tell us as that if we accept him in our life, he can uplift us and lead us to the heights of God the Father.” Perhaps we can use today’s celebration of the baptism of Jesus to celebrate our own baptism. Just as Jesus is revealed as the beloved Son at his baptism, so too we receive a new identity in baptism--as members of the Body of Christ and adopted and beloved children of God.

This invitation to a new life in baptism is offered to all people. Before Jesus ascended to heaven, he commissioned his disciples to go and make disciples of all nations baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. The second reading from the Acts of Apostles talks about the invitation that God has offered to everyone. The passage is a story about Peter’s visit to the house of the Roman Cornelius. During Jesus’ life on earth, Peter and the disciples understood that their mission was only to the Israelites. After Jesus’ resurrection, through a dream Peter learned that their mission was extended to all people. In today’s passage, Peter explained to the household of Cornelius that Peter’s own mission based on the

baptism of Jesus was extended to people like Cornelius and his household. The baptism that Jesus gives us enables us to go about doing good as Jesus did.

Today's celebration calls us to reflect on our baptism through the perspective of the baptism of our Lord. As Jesus' baptism inaugurated his mission to serve, our own baptism calls us to serve the Lord. As we celebrate the baptism of our Lord, we are reminded that as baptized people in the Holy Spirit, we are encouraged to live out our baptismal commitment to use our God-given gifts to serve others.

Today's celebration also serves as the First Sunday in Ordinary Time. This means that we enter into a new liturgical Season-the Season of Ordinary Time. We are also continuing our journey of faith during this COVID-19 pandemic. This is the time to respond to our call to serve others in a way that we might not have done before. In these times of uncertainties and challenges, what we do to help promote peace, justice and kindness would reflect God's love in our world. Let us pray that God may continue to keep alive in our hearts the spirit of charity that came with the celebration of Christmas. As we move into the new liturgical Season of Ordinary Time, let us bring this joyful charity with us. These attitudes show our commitment to our faith, the faith we profess with our baptism.

Fr. Yaw Acheampong

Please note that apart from the Gospel reading, the other readings are alternate readings for the celebration of today's liturgy.

This homily has been prepared for a congregation at a distance.