**The Baptism of the Lord**

Today we celebrate the Baptism of Jesus by John in the river Jordan. As we read in Scripture, John was preaching repentance in the wilderness and baptizing those who came to him. *Then went out to him Jerusalem and all Judea and all the region about the Jordan, and they were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins.* (Matt 3:5-6) We see as well that Jesus, too, like the multitude, went out into the wilderness seeking John in order to be baptized. As we read in Matthew: *Then Jesus came from Galilee to the Jordan to John, to be baptized by him.* (3:13)

This fact has always posed an interesting question to the faithful. We know that John’s baptism was one of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. That is how John the Baptist described his ministry, but Jesus was without sin and thus not in need of the cleansing of baptism. In Matthew’s account, even John has trouble understanding this: *John would have prevented him, saying, “I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?”****15****But Jesus answered him, “Let it be so now; for thus it is fitting for us to fulfil all righteousness.* (Matt. 3:14-15) The question we are left with, then, is what are we to make of the Baptism of Jesus, and how are we to see it in the overall context of our life of faith. The answer, I believe, is twofold: firstly, Jesus’ baptism shows us Christ’s humility, a humility that reaches its peak in the crucifixion; and secondly, the baptism provides another instance of Christ manifesting himself to the world.

With regards to humility, we see in Christ’s Baptism the extent to which God comes into humanity in order to save it. As with the lowliness of his birth in a manger, Christ allows himself to be baptized by his own creation. St. Proclus of Constantinople put it this way: *Come then and see new and overwhelming miracles: the sun of righteousness bathing in the Jordan, the fire immersed in water, and God being sanctified by human ministry.* This is another instance or expression of the stooping down of God in loving kindness to humanity, his condescension to the level of this world. As St. Paul says of Christ: *though he was in the form of God, [he] did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped,**but emptied himself, taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men.* The Baptism in the Jordan is an expression of Jesus’ entire life—a submission to the Father’s will for the sake of our salvation.

In the very same way, the Baptism is a prefiguring of the crucifixion. Both are examples of God’s love as expressed in His total self-giving. As Jesus goes down into the Jordan, so too on Calvary he will sink down into the waters of death, and in both cases he transforms them, changing the baptism of John into one of “fire and the Holy Spirit,” and transforming death itself by his resurrection. As the Dominican scholar Aidan Nichols says: “What … makes the Baptism great as a festival of the Church is that … it is the preamble of the Crucifixion. The whole destiny of Jesus is contained within it. It is the culmination of Christmastide because it is the source of the impetus that will carry us on to Easter.” The Baptism thus encapsulates the entire life of Jesus and points towards his ultimate mission.

The second aspect of Christ’s Baptism is as an instance of Christ’s manifestation to the world. In the ancient Latin tradition, three miracles were celebrated on the Feast of the Epiphany: the visit of the Magi; the Baptism of the Lord; and the wedding at Cana. These were all understood as the epiphany or manifestation of the Lord to the world. In the Baptism we have the voice of God Himself proclaiming, as He does again at the Transfiguration, “This is my Beloved Son.” The voice of God here reveals Jesus to those listening, and is the proof of who Jesus is and of his own claims of authority. Regarding the Transfiguration event, Saint Peter writes: *For we did not follow cleverly devised myths when we made known to you the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but we were eyewitnesses of his majesty. For when he received honor and glory from God the Father and the voice was borne to him by the Majestic Glory, “This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased,” we heard this voice borne from heaven, for we were with him on the holy mountain.* (2 Peter 1:16-18) John the Baptist notes too that this sign was a clear indication that Jesus was the Messiah he had been preaching about: *“I saw the Spirit descend as a dove from heaven, and it remained on him.**I myself did not know him; but he who sent me to baptize with water said to me, ‘He on whom you see the Spirit descend and remain, this is he who baptizes with the Holy Spirit.’**And I have seen and have borne witness that this is the Son of God.”* (John 1:32-34)

The Baptism is thus a fulfillment of the prophecies given to Isaiah: *And the glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and all flesh shall see it together, for the mouth of the Lord has spoken. (40:5);* and *Behold my servant, whom I uphold, my chosen, in whom my soul delights; I have put my Spirit upon him, he will bring forth justice to the nations.* *(42:1)* It is a manifestation of Christ, revealing him to us as the Son of God.

We might be tempted to leave it there, but the aspect of Jesus’ manifestation and even his self-giving or self-emptying, as St. Paul puts it, has a particular bearing upon our lives as well. In his second Epistle to the Corinthians, St. Paul says: *always carrying in the body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be manifested in our bodies.**For while we live we are always being given up to death for Jesus’ sake, so that the life of Jesus may be manifested in our mortal flesh.* (2Cor 4:10-11). This is closely connected with what he says in Galatians:  *it is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me.* (2:20).

As the Baptism fits into the larger context of the Epiphany, the manifestation of Jesus, we now understand that in and through our own baptism, a baptism which, as St. Paul reminds us, results in our putting on Christ (Gal 3:27), we too are called to manifest, to show forth, Christ within us. In the Baptism of Christ, therefore, it is not simply the fact that Jesus was revealed to us as the Son of God, our Savior and Redeemer, but that this revelation is to be, indeed must be, an ongoing one in the lives of his followers. We are called to continually manifest Jesus in our lives through living in complete surrender to the Father’s will and in our self-sacrifice for others. We manifest Jesus ultimately in love. As St. John says: *No one has ever seen God; if we love one another, God abides in us and his love is perfected in us.* (1Jn 4:12) Through His grace, may such a love take root within our hearts, and may we always be able to manifest Christ to the world in our love for God and for each other.