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Most of us celebrate our birthdays. Some among us also celebrate our feast day or patron saint day, but how many of us celebrate the day of our baptism? In his book *Christianity: The Making of Christians*, Mark Searle reminds readers that for many centuries it was customary in the church to celebrate the pascha annotinum or the anniversary of baptism (Kevin Mayhew Ltd., London: 1979). It was a sort of class reunion for the baptized, their sponsors and the bishop, at which they celebrated the Eucharist together. The opening collect of the Gelasian Sacramentary reflects the significance of this celebration: “O God ... let the solemn occasion which we recall be permanently effective in our lives so that we may remain faithful in practice to what we now commemorate.”

In remembering our baptism, we remember whose we are and how we are to conduct ourselves so that our true identity as believers in God, in Jesus and in the Holy Spirit inspires and directs all we are and all we do.

Today, we remember Jesus’ baptism, and in our annual celebration of this event, we also recall the mission Jesus accepted on that day. Luke simply, eloquently describes that mission in today’s second reading from Acts: “He went about doing good.” From the moment he began to teach and preach about the reign of God, Jesus, who was God’s good agent, set himself at odds with evil. His actions were not merely acts of

mercy but an assault on all that was unholy, “for God was with him,” as Luke has attested.

In order to grasp the significance of Jesus’ ministry, Christians have traditionally looked to the Isaian servant songs, the first of which constitutes today’s first reading. There, the servant is described as one endowed with God’s own spirit in order to bring forth justice for the nations. As Walter Brueggemann has pointed out, the work of justice done by the servant is a deeply conflicted, high-risk matter, but he does not proceed with force or high-handed authority (Texts for Preaching, Westminster John Knox Press, Louisville, Ky.: 1995). God’s justice is wrought gently, carefully, lovingly. So also will the servant bring light and healing and freedom to all in need. The Gospels make it clear that the earliest believers understood Jesus and his ministry in light of the Isaian servant. From the moment of his baptism, when he was endowed by the Spirit and identified as God’s Son and Servant (Gospel), Jesus served God’s purpose.

Although Deutero-Isaiah probably had someone else in mind (Hezekiah? Jeremiah? the people of Israel?) when these descriptive songs were composed, the *sensus plenior* or “fuller sense” of scripture enables us to recognize that these songs came to life and found their fulfillment in Jesus.

Brueggemann (op. cit.) insists we take note of the fact that the servant is never named in any of the four servant songs. Therefore, each time we hear these songs proclaimed, we must decide who the servant is. Granted, we see Jesus in this role — but shouldn’t we also see the church as God’s servant, establishing justice, being light and healing for all? Shouldn’t we also see ourselves as God’s anointed servants, filled with the Holy Spirit and equipped with every good gift in order to do God’s work? If we were to read each of the songs and insert our own name, how might that clarify who we are to be and what we are to do for God and for others?

As we celebrate Jesus’ baptism today and as we remember our own, let us also be renewed in our efforts to uphold God’s justice and to be the light in someone else’s darkness.

ISAIAH 42:1-4, 6-7

First of the four servant songs included in Deutero-Isaiah’s Book of Comfort (Isa 40-55), this song was probably on the Matthean evangelist’s mind as he composed the

narrative of Jesus' baptism. A voice from the heavens affirmed, "This is my beloved Son with whom I am well pleased" (Matt 3:17). Compare this affirmation with the Isaian text: "Here is my servant ... my chosen one in whom I am pleased" (Isa 42:1). Many scholars attest that the word for "son" in Matthew is an ambiguous translation of the original Aramaic word for "servant." In view of the servant's mission and his later suffering and death, the association with Jesus becomes even more pronounced.

When the songs were first composed in the sixth century B.C.E., the recipients of Deutero-Isaiah's efforts were in exile. As their companion, he did his best to encourage them to keep the faith and retain their hope that God would intervene on their behalf. How heartening these songs must have been with their promises of a leader, chosen and anointed by God to establish justice, to be the one in whom the covenant would be renewed, to be the light for all nations, to bring healing and liberation to those confined in the darkness and shame of exile.

Scholars point out that the people of Judah had not simply failed politically. It wasn't just that their army was inferior to that of the Babylonians. On the contrary, and as is reflected in the writing of the prophets, the people of Judah had fallen short of the ethical, social and moral standards demanded by virtue of their covenant with God. According to the prophets, it was their own infidelity to God and to their religious heritage that led to the demise of Judah. Indeed, the prophets interpreted their exile as deserved punishment for sin. For that reason, their release from exile was not merely a political decision on the part of Cyrus the Persian. Rather, it was God's doing. Notice how God's initiative is repeatedly confirmed by the prophet in this pericope. Again and again, the pronoun "I" attests to God's role in engineering the release (i.e., the salvation) of the exiles and returning them to their own land and way of life.

Christians appreciate all that God has done for the people of Israel and regard their return home and reconciliation with God as a foretaste of what God would later effect in Jesus for all of humankind. Through his affirmation by God at his baptism, Jesus was confirmed as the Servant of the new and everlasting covenant and the one in whom all of Israel's hopes and prophetic expectations were fulfilled. Through his ministry and sacrificial death, all have been liberated, and, in his glorious victory over death, salvation has been made available to all.

ACTS 10:34-38

A Roman soldier stationed at the garrison in Caesarea, Cornelius was also a God-fearer, i.e., a devout gentile who attended synagogue services, worshiped only the God of the Israelites and observed the Decalogue, but did not submit to circumcision or adhere to Jewish dietary laws. As the narrative of Peter's visit to Cornelius' home unfolds, it becomes evident that this was a watershed moment in the history of the early church. Not only was Cornelius converted to the faith by Peter, the recognized leader of the community, but Peter too was undergoing a transformation. He welcomed Cornelius as a brother in the faith and ate with him in his home!

Apologetically, Luke used the Cornelius event to put to rest two of the most difficult challenges that faced the early church. First, rather than going to Christ through Moses — that is, rather than being forced to embrace Judaism in order to become Christian — gentiles should be free to come to Christ without restriction. A second challenge was especially difficult for many Jews who had grown accustomed to avoiding gentiles. Through the Cornelius episode, Luke offered the assurance that contact with gentiles does not result in ritual defilement.

In accepting Cornelius with the declaration that “God shows no partiality” (v. 34), Peter moved beyond the boundaries that he, as an observant Jew, had regarded as sacred and inviolable. In accepting Cornelius without reserve, Luke taught (through Peter's speech) that Christianity placed no restrictions or barriers of acceptability based on race or former beliefs. In Christ Jesus, all such limitations and exclusivity had become obsolete and meaningless.

Having acknowledged God's acceptance of Cornelius as well as all those who fear God and act uprightly, Luke has Peter offer a short summary of the Christian kerygma. Just as the word or good news of salvation had been preached among the Israelites, now it would be proclaimed among the gentiles. This simple statement in verse 36 may have been intended as a clarification. Some accused Paul and others of preaching a “diluted” Gospel to the gentiles, but here Luke leaves no doubt that the same Gospel was preached to Israelites and gentiles alike.

In the kerygma that follows (vv. 38-40), Luke assures readers that God anointed Jesus with the Holy Spirit and power. All that Jesus did and said was foreordained by God for the salvation of humankind. Strengthened by the Spirit and the power given him from God, Jesus went about doing good. Had the entire kerygma been quoted here (vv. 38-43), it would have included references to Jesus' salvific death and victorious resurrection, without which the kerygma is incomplete. This same

kerygma continues to be preached and professed by every baptized believer.

MATTHEW 3:13-17

By the time the Matthean Gospel was finalized in the 80s C.E., John's baptism of Jesus had become an issue that needed clarification. Why would the sinless Jesus participate in a baptism for sinners? Why would Jesus, who in person and mission was superior to John, submit to the Baptizer? These questions were made more difficult by the fact that some of John's followers continued to cling to their conviction that he had been the messiah.

When each of the evangelists told of Jesus' baptism, they did so fully aware of these issues. For that reason, Matthew did not dwell on the baptism per se, but simply said, "After Jesus was baptized ..." (v. 16). Then, the evangelist used that moment in Jesus' life to affirm Jesus' identity and to inaugurate his messianic mission.

Scholars have suggested Jesus participated in the rite at the Jordan to offer an example of humility that others might follow. Some have seen in Jesus' action a sign of his willingness to embrace sinners so as to redeem them. Still others, citing verse 15 (unique to the Matthean account), would have us appreciate Jesus' strict adherence to God's plan for him and for the world.

To affirm Jesus' identity and his mission, a voice spoke from heaven. Voice — or, more literally, bath hoe, which means "daughter of a voice" — was a term used in rabbinic literature to refer to the means by which God revealed the divine purpose after prophecy had ceased. Here, the voice proclaims Jesus as God's beloved Son with whom God is well pleased. Scholars see this as an obvious association of Jesus with the Isaian servant (first reading).

The image of an opened sky was probably meant to remind Matthew's readers of Isaiah 64:1 (or in some translations, 63:19): "O that you would rend the heavens and come down." This cry summed up the hopes of the prophet and his contemporaries as they begged for messianic intervention. By referencing this Isaian text, Matthew was affirming that the era of the messiah was now beginning in Jesus.

This affirmation was further clarified by the presence of the Spirit of God coming upon and "anointing" Jesus. Just as kings, priests and prophets were anointed by God in order to carry out their respective duties, and just as the Isaian servant (Isa 42:1-2) was anointed for his salvific mission, so was Jesus endowed with and

empowered by God's own Spirit. In addition to representing the presence of God, the dove was often regarded as a symbol for Israel as God's chosen one (Song of Songs 1:15; 2:24; 4:1; 5:2; 6:9). Perhaps the Matthean evangelist would also want readers to recognize the dove as a symbol of the new Israel: that is, all the people of God for whom Jesus would exercise his saving ministry.

Planning: Baptism of the Lord

By: Lawrence Mick

This feast was once celebrated as part of the feast of the Epiphany. Along with the wedding feast at Cana, it was seen as one of three times when Christ and his mission were made manifest to the world.

There are variations in the Gospel accounts of Jesus' baptism in the Jordan. In both Mark and Luke, the voice from heaven seems addressed directly to Jesus: "You are my beloved Son." But in Matthew's account, which we hear this year, the voice speaks to the crowd: "This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased." Since the baptism was a public event, all three Gospels present it as a manifestation, but Matthew makes it even clearer with this change of language.

This could be a good opportunity to help people understand more fully the communal nature of baptism. It is still, sadly, all too common to encounter families who want a "private baptism" for their child, involving only their family members because it is such a special moment for them. Baptism is always more than a special moment for the one baptized or for his or her family. It is a moment to be celebrated by the church community, because it is a moment of commitment to carry on the mission of Christ that has been entrusted to the church.

This is, of course, quite evident in the baptism of Jesus, and it is significant that this feast was a primary time for baptism in many areas of the early church. Christian baptism was seen as imitating Christ's own baptism and taking on the mission that he accepted. Like Jesus, we are God's beloved children, and like him, we are charged with proclaiming the presence of God's kingdom in our world.

If this kind of baptismal catechesis is not the focus of the homily, planners might provide it with a special bulletin insert today or at least a significant bulletin article. There is a constant need to foster deeper awareness of the significance of baptism,

not only for those approaching the sacrament for themselves or their children but also for those long baptized who still need to live out the implications of that sacrament on a daily basis.

Remember that this feast is the final day of Christmas. While music and texts will logically have some baptismal focus, keep some sense of Christmas in there, too, perhaps closing with a Christmas song to mark the end of the season. You might also invite the assembly to stay after the last Mass to help remove the Christmas decorations (and perhaps take home any remaining Christmas flowers); a little party afterward might entice more helpers to stay.

Prayers: Baptism of the Lord

By: Paige Byrne Shortel

Introduction

Brothers and sisters in Christ, today we celebrate the Feast of the Baptism of the Lord. We will hear in the Gospel that Jesus was baptized by his cousin John, and we hear the voice of God saying, “This is my beloved Son with whom I am well pleased.” Let us pray for the gift to live our lives so that we hear these words spoken in our hearts — that we are loved and pleasing to our God.

Penitential Act

- Lord Jesus, you are the beloved Son of your Father: Lord, have mercy.
- Christ Jesus, you are the loving brother of all humankind: Christ, have mercy.
- Lord Jesus, you are the Lord and savior of the world: Lord, have mercy.

Prayers of the Faithful

Presider On this day we celebrate the baptism of Jesus, let us remember the promises of our baptism — among them, to intercede for the world. This is the duty of every Christian, and so we pray.

Minister For peace everywhere: for an end to war, to violence, to bullying, to cruel

behavior and hurtful speech. For an end to all that makes this world less like heaven ... we pray,

- For the church: that our leaders and all Christians may witness to the values, principles and ideals that Jesus preached ... we pray,
- For our young people: for their formation in the faith and for all that they need to choose a healthy, holy, peaceful, productive path for their lives ... we pray,
- For those who are sick or suffering: for those who are frightened for their future; for those lonely in nursing homes; for those who are facing their last days and praying for a peaceful death ... we pray,
- We pray for those who have died ... (names). And for all who mourn the passing of a loved one ... we pray,

Presider Creator God, you called us in baptism and you continue to call us each day. Hear our prayers today and help us to listen for your voice and answer your call so that someday we may hear that you are well-pleased with us. We pray in Jesus' name. Amen.

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