

Feast of the Baptism of the Lord

January 9-10, 2016

Readings: Isaiah 42: 1-4, 6-7; Acts 10: 34-38 or Titus 2: 11-14; 3:4-7; Luke 3:15-16, 21-22

Have you ever been asked the question, “Are you pleased with yourself?” If your experience is like mine, more often than not, it was asked in a mildly sarcastic tone. The key is the add-on, “with yourself.” It may be okay to be pleased, but to be pleased with oneself connotes pride, smugness, conceit and self-absorption. It is one thing to be pleased with a situation, but people recoil if we appear to be too pleased with ourselves. To be a “people pleaser” is a pejorative comment. Humility is an essential attribute of the spiritual life, and it flies in the face of a culture that places such a priority upon achievement narrowly defined.

So, it may come as a little bit of a surprise when the voice comes from the Lord with regard to the suffering servant in Isaiah saying: “Here is my servant whom I uphold, my chosen one with whom I am pleased.” What about humility? In both cases (Isaiah and the Gospel), the servant is not speaking of himself, but it is the Lord who is pleased. It carries with it no retinue of self-absorption, only a recognition that the servant is carrying out the will of the Lord.

Christ demonstrated utter humility in undergoing Baptism. He did not need to do so, for he was sinless. By completely identify himself to the frail human condition, we in turn can better identify the suffering servant, our Savior. His Baptism was vicarious in nature, that is, he did so in our stead. We the Baptized, were immersed with Christ, and with him, we were buried again. Still, we desire nothing more than to be pleasing to the Lord, clean and pure in His sight.

The Baptism of the Lord in the Jordan marks the beginning of his public ministry. The private phase of his life, the “hidden life” so to speak, is over. And it never returned again.

He began his life in humility in the manger in Bethlehem, ended it in public humiliation through death on the Cross, and remains even now, our servant, reigning from heaven, but in our service. In each celebration of the Mass, Christ's Baptism is operative. We are immersed in His death and resurrection, the heavens open and the Bread from heaven descends into our hearts and souls.

Many of the Fathers of the Church, as well as the medieval Scholastics, saw Christ's Baptism as the institution of the sacrament. His Flesh blessed the water, and that the Father was well pleased became the signal that now the public ministry was to begin. In the account by Saint Mark, the Lord adds immediately the words "listen to him." Saint Luke does not. It may represent nothing, but perhaps it signals that the key point needed no reinforcement, namely that God was pleased in His Son.

The Gospel portrays the people as waiting in expectation of John's Baptism, wondering if he might be the Christ. His was a Baptism of repentance. No one aspires to a new world remaining immersed in egoism (self-absorption) and in the habits bound to sin. We want to be freed from these habits; we want to be cleansed.

In my meetings with couple preparing for Baptism, I have begun to ask a new question. I ask them if they are in any way concerned about raising a child in the world of today. The answer comes back as quickly as I ask it- "Absolutely- in fact, we are scared." Surely, some may be attributable to the expected nervousness of being a first time parent, but I sense that it is much deeper. It is borne from a concern about the nature and complexity of today's world- "What kind of world is our son or daughter entering into...?" We in the Church see why it is so important to offer support to young couples, letting them know that they are not alone. We're in this together.

At the Jordan, Jesus manifests extraordinary humility, recalling the poverty and simplicity of the manger, and anticipating the humiliation of the Cross. Jesus rises up out of the water, as affirms St. Gregory Nazianzen, “ and sees the heavens separating and opening, those heavens which **Adam** had shut against himself and all his posterity.<sup>1</sup> He has begun his work as the new Adam. We too, on account of our Baptism, have work to do. But we’re in this together, and God will give us the grace to see it through.

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<sup>1</sup> Pope Benedict XVI, homily for Baptism of the Lord, 10 Jan. 2010. The Holy Father was quoting St. Gregory, *Discorso 39 per il Battesimo del Signore*, PG 36.