

Feast of the Baptism of the Lord

January 12-13, 2019

Readings: Isaiah 42: 1-4, 6-7; 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, perhaps by a teacher, maybe a loving parent, when we became haughty. The key is the add-on, “with yourself.” To be pleased *with oneself* connotes pride, smugness, 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. 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, not to mention the medieval Scholastics, saw Christ's Baptism as the institution of the sacrament. His very flesh blessed the water, and that the Father was well pleased became the signal that now the public ministry was to begin. We are told in our second reading that Jesus gave himself for us to deliver us” and “to cleanse for himself a people as his own.”

In our Gospel the people were 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. He speculated that Jesus waited in line like others in the crowd, but John intuited immediately that there was something unique.

At the Jordan, Jesus manifests extraordinary humility, recalling the poverty and simplicity of the manger, and anticipating the humiliation of the Cross.<sup>1</sup> 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>2</sup> He has begun his work as the new Adam. We too, on account of our Baptism, have work to do. In fact, the work has just begun.

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. Pope Benedict XVI, homily for Baptism of the Lord, 10 Jan. 2010

<sup>2</sup> Cf. *Discorso 39 per il Battesimo del Signore*, PG 36