

THE BAPTISM OF THE LORD

JAN. 9, 2022

Reflection by Sister Benita Coffey, OSB

Isaiah 42:1-4, 6-7; Acts10: 34– 8; Luke 3: 15-15, 21-22

The name of the feast today, The Baptism of the Lord, quite likely brings to mind a picture of John, baptizing Jesus, and perhaps a dove is visible. And if any words come to mind, they are not “I baptize you” but what echoes are these “You are my beloved Son; with you I am well pleased.” We maybe don’t give much thought about the early history of baptism for the Jewish nation. Actually, it was it was an ancient practice.

Neither John nor Jesus invented Baptism. It had been practiced for centuries among the Jews as a ritual, somewhat equivalent to our practice of acknowledging our sinfulness in the sacrament of reconciliation. It was common for Jewish people to use a special pool called Mikveh—for spiritual cleansing. It was understood that this ritual truly carried the power for spiritual cleansing to remove all spiritual impurity and sin. Men took this bath weekly on the eve of the Sabbath; women monthly. Converts were also expected to take this bath before entering Judaism. John preached that such a bath was necessary preparation for the momentous event of the coming of the Messiah. Among orthodox Jews there is still such a practice today.

Jesus had come to earth to experience human life and in seeking baptism he united himself with the religion of his upbringing. (One apocryphal book, Gospel According to the Hebrews suggested Jesus might have gone to seek the baptism of John to please his mother and relatives.)

Jesus’ Baptism is described for us in the three synoptic gospels in ways that are similar. In all three we hear the words “This is my Beloved Son” and we are told of a visible sign, a dove. In Matthew’s and Mark’s narratives, Jesus came to the Jordan for the Baptism of John. What is different about Luke’s rendition is that, if we read the full text of the narrative, we know that John is actually in prison at the time. King Herod had

become fearful of John's growing popularity with the people, so had him locked up. Since here today we have simply two snippets from the story put together for us, we may not notice that there is no mention by Luke of *who* baptized Jesus. We just hear "after all the people had been baptized and Jesus also had been baptized and was praying heaven was opened and the Holy Spirit descended upon him in bodily form like a dove. And a voice came from heaven, "You are my beloved Son; with you I am well pleased." So we see that Jesus, having taken flesh to live among us, began his public life by doing what was common for believers of his time. At this point he started his ministry and life of modelling for us what self-giving means. So for us, what does his Baptism mean? Or better still what does our Baptism mean for us today?

I found a lot to reflect on in a commentary by Maryknoll Father, Dae Kim, which was prepared for today, calling us to use the Feast of the Baptism of the Lord, as an invitation to remember our baptism and to reaffirm ourselves more responsibly in our faith. It can be easy to forget that faith is not a thing we possess, but a living and personal relationship with God. Our faith is something which grows deeper and more endearing over time. It is not just accepting what the Church tells us but rather seeking to open ourselves in a humble and trusting way to God. External rites and even our careful adherence to common life are meaningless unless they open us to believe ever more deeply, listen to the Word interiorly, and LIVE the gospel.

The awesome mystery, the challenge we have, the daily invitation to SEEK GOD, is deeply personal. But let's never forget, it is done in community, with others, in Church, and for us Benedictine Sisters and Oblates, in our monastic life. Just as we celebrate on this day that Jesus presented himself to be baptized and, as God-man to receive the Holy Spirit, may we take joy in opening ourselves to be purified and be shaped by that same Spirit that animated all of Jesus' actions. We too are beloved children of God and in us God is well pleased.

Today ends the Christmas season. The ministry of Jesus was begun after his Baptism. We now must continue to be the presence of Jesus, loving and serving. He came to bring peace and to be sure that all people of the world were fed and nourished, physically and

spiritually. That task seems still to remain unfinished. Each and every one of us here has a part to play. We've been baptized. We are beloved in whom God is well pleased. In our every day work and prayer, in our stability, obedience and fidelity to the monastic way, let's get busy. Welcome to Ordinary Time.