

AS WE ARE BAPTISED, WE ARE CHANGED

Isaiah 42. 1-9

Acts 10. 34-43

Matthew 3. 13-17

I speak to you in the name of † the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.
Amen.

Many of you will remember Mikhail Gorbachev, who became head of state of the Soviet Union from 1988 until 1991, after having served a number of high-level government posts in the Communist Party. The story is told that Gorbachev's grandmother had him secretly baptised by a Russian Orthodox priest. Following Gorbachev's baptism, his mother hung an icon of our Lord on the wall of every room in their house. Gorbachev's father, who did not share his wife's religious convictions, was a staunch Communist; and he proceeded to hang a picture of Stalin next to every icon of Jesus. Following the fall of the Berlin Wall in November 1989, television channels from all over the world showed footage of Gorbachev being driven into the Vatican to meet Pope John Paul II. The two men met and spoke in the Pope's private library for seventy minutes. Had Gorbachev not been baptised, this meeting would probably have never occurred. Baptism counts. Baptism makes a difference.

Our Gospel account relates the story of Christ's baptism. Just prior to our Lord's baptism, something new and big was happening. John the Baptist was baptising *all those* who came to him in the river Jordan. This was new and big because before then, the only people who normally were baptised were Gentiles who converted to become Jews. But now, as John continued to preach, even the Jews themselves were coming to be baptised by him. They probably did not fully understand the enormity of what was happening; but they were actually preparing for the coming of Jesus. It was extraordinary.

In this context, we may surely wonder why Christ requested that John baptise him. Our Lord did not have any sins to repent of; and the baptism offered by John was one of repentance (Lk 3. 3). When people went to John at the river Jordan, they did so because they acknowledged their sinfulness; and their baptism symbolised turning over a new leaf in their lives and leaving sin behind. Jesus, as the epistle to the Hebrews assures us, was like us in every way, but without sin (Heb 4. 15). This explains why John objected to Christ's request for baptism. To quote John in our text: 'I need to be baptised *by you*, and do you come to me?'

The answer that our Lord gave John helps us to understand why Jesus wanted to be baptised. He said, 'Let it be so now: for it is proper for us in this way to fulfil all righteousness.' 'To fulfil all righteousness' is why Christ wanted to be baptised. We might find this answer difficult to understand: Our Lord was certainly not lacking in righteousness; he was already fully righteous. So how could his baptism fulfil all righteousness?

The sinless Jesus did not have any sins of his own to take down into the river Jordan; therefore it could only have been *our sins* that he took down with him into the river. Naturally, no one understood this at that time; but they would realise this later when they understood that Christ died on the cross for our sins. Our Lord's baptism in the Jordan and his dying on the cross go together; he accomplished both for our sins.

This close connection between Jesus's baptism and his cross is evidenced elsewhere in the Scriptures. The prophet Isaiah, for example, prophesied that a servant would suffer because of our sins (Isa 52. 13-53. 12). We are familiar with this prophecy of Isaiah, because we hear it every year on Good Friday. This suffering servant would be righteous and by his suffering would make sinners righteous. This prophecy obviously predicts Christ's Passion.

And then our Lord, when *he* spoke prophetically about his Passion, described it as a baptism. In the gospel of Luke he states, ‘I have a baptism with which to be baptised, and what stress I am under until it is completed!’ (Lk 12. 50). When James and John say that they want to sit in glory beside Jesus, he spoke again about his Passion and said, ‘You do not know what you are asking. Are you able to drink the cup that I drink, or be baptised with the baptism that I am baptised with?’ (Mk 10. 38).

On the cross, Christ took our sins on himself and made us righteous. When our Lord was baptised, he was already looking forward to taking our sins on himself on the cross. In this way we see that when Jesus was baptised, all righteousness was fulfilled.¹

If we take a moment to think about it, there is a huge difference between the baptism of John (that Christ received) and the baptism that we have received. Yes, in our baptism, we were baptised with water, as our Lord was; but as John himself said in another gospel, ‘I baptise with water’... (but) ‘he on whom you see the Spirit descend and remain is the one who baptises with the Holy Spirit’ (Jn 1. 26, 33). John’s baptism in itself did not bring about a change in person, even though it was a sign of the person’s desire to turn back from sin to God again. But Jesus gives us the Holy Spirit when we are baptised.² This is signified by the anointing of our foreheads with the

¹ Just as there is a close link between Christ’s baptism and his cross, there is also a close link between our baptism and our Lord’s cross. In his epistle to the Romans, Paul tells us, ‘Do you not know that all of us who have been baptised into Christ Jesus were baptised into his death? Therefore we have been buried with him by baptism into death, so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life’ (Rom 6. 3-4).

Paul is saying that when we were baptised, we spiritually entered the tomb with Jesus to leave a life of sin behind. When we were baptised, we buried sin by spiritually entering the tomb with Christ and we rose again with the new life of our Lord, just as Jesus rose to new life out of the tomb. Our baptism, just like the other sacraments, receives its power from Christ’s death and resurrection. Our baptism is a sharing in the effects and salvation of our Lord’s death and resurrection, a sharing in the new life of Jesus that we receive from his death and resurrection.

² The presence of God in the temple in the Old Testament was called the Shekinah or Glory of God, which was really the Holy Spirit, visible in the form of a cloud. A Jewish tradition says that before the temple was destroyed in 587 BC the Shekinah or Glory of God was seen departing the temple in the form of a dove. Although the temple was later rebuilt, the Shekinah or Glory of God did not return to the temple. The next time we see a dove is at Jesus’s baptism when the Holy Spirit descended on Christ. Our Lord is the replacement of the temple of the New Covenant. Now, Christ is the temple, and the Holy Spirit - seen in the form of a dove departing the temple before its destruction - descends on our Lord; and when we are baptised, the Holy Spirit descends on us, sealing us for ever.

oil of chrism. And when that happens, we are profoundly changed. The change is so great that the quality of our soul is transformed. Baptism is not just something external; it is not just a certificate that we receive on paper; it profoundly changes our souls.

Christ's baptism in the Jordan expressed the intention of his whole life right up to dying on the cross for us, taking our sins on himself to save us. Our baptism also expresses the intention of our whole life up to our death, to leave our sin behind and to live with the life of our Lord. Every day, we are called to live out our baptism with that new life of Jesus. Every day is another opportunity to turn from sin and continue following Christ, which we began with our baptism. Our baptism receives its power from our Lord's death and resurrection. Our baptism is a sharing in the effects and salvation of Jesus' death and resurrection, a sharing in the new life of Christ that we receive from his death and resurrection. Our Lord was baptised so that all righteousness might be fulfilled; and this happens when we live our baptism by turning from sin to live the life of Jesus.

In closing, we may ask, what difference does baptism make to us? When Christ was baptised, the Father spoke and said, 'This is my Son, the Beloved; with whom I am well pleased.' When *we* are baptised, the Father says over each of us, 'You are my son/you are my daughter, my Beloved; with you I am well pleased.'

Thanks be to God. Amen.