

# THE BAPTISM OF CHRIST

Isaiah 43. 1-7

Acts 8. 14-17

Luke 3. 15-17, 21-22

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

Today, we are celebrating the First Sunday of Epiphany and the Feast of the Baptism of Christ.<sup>1</sup> It is significant that the Church has set aside a special day to remember it. Our Lord's baptism was indeed an historic day that marked the beginning of his ministry; and it was an event, as we shall see, that had huge consequences for Christian doctrine and practise.

As we think of Jesus' baptism, the first question that comes to our minds is, 'Why did Christ have to be baptised anyway?' You will remember that the Gospels tell us that John the Baptist practised a baptism of repentance. When John baptised, the emphasis was on moral purity and conversion; his baptisms were intended to prepare people for the coming of God's kingdom and for his judgement.

Our Lord, who had been described by John as the one who would come after him and baptise with the Holy Spirit and with fire,<sup>2</sup> obviously had no need of John's baptism of repentance. Jesus was already morally pure; he was, and

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<sup>1</sup> Prior to the fourth century, the early Christian Church celebrated Christmas, Epiphany, the Baptism of the Lord and even Christ's first miracle at Cana all together on the same day, that is, the 6th of January. However, by the last quarter of the fourth century, it had been decided that the birth of Jesus would be celebrated on the 25th of December and that the Feast of the Presentation of Christ at the Temple would be celebrated forty days later, on the 2nd of February. Other events, including Christ's baptism, were then allocated to feast days that fell between these two dates; which is why we celebrate Jesus' baptism today.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. Lk 3. 16; Mt 3. 11; Acts 1. 5, 8; 2: 1 – 13; Joel 2. 28 – 29.

always will be, sinless.<sup>3</sup> In spite of this truth, it was actually very important that the baptism of Christ occur. It occurred for a number of reasons:

- Firstly, as we see in a parallel text in the Gospel of John,<sup>4</sup> Jesus' baptism provided an occasion for John the Baptist to publicly announce the arrival of the Messiah and the beginning of his ministry;

- Secondly, even though he needed no repentance or forgiveness from sin, by his baptism our Lord took a public step in which he identified himself with humanity's sin and failure, and his willingness to become our substitute.<sup>5</sup> In a way, Jesus' baptism was his first step toward Calvary.

- Thirdly, Christ's baptism was an example for those of us who are his followers;<sup>6</sup>

- And finally (and this is a very significant reason), Jesus' baptism was a public demonstration that he was totally consecrated to God and officially approved by him.

Proof that our Lord was totally consecrated to God and officially approved by him was given in several ways. The first proof was given when, as verse 22 of our text tells us, Jesus saw heaven being torn open and the Holy Spirit descending on him like a dove. This coming of the Holy Spirit upon Christ,

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<sup>3</sup> Cf. Heb 4. 15.

<sup>4</sup> Cf. Jn 1. 29 – 34.

<sup>5</sup> Cf. 2 Cor 5. 21.

<sup>6</sup> This having been said, it must be remembered that John's baptism of repentance was a prototype for Christian baptism. The chief difference is that Christian baptism is 'in the name of Jesus' and takes its direction and meaning especially from Jesus' death and resurrection (cf. Rom 6. 1 – 11).

which was in fact seen by all who were present,<sup>7</sup> reminded and reassured him that he was equipped by the Spirit of God to bring in the kingdom.

The second way in which proof was given was equally spectacular: the Father's voice came from heaven, saying 'You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased' (1: 12).<sup>8 9 10</sup>

That the Father is well pleased at the baptism of his beloved Son means more, of course, than God being pleased that Jesus was baptised. It means that the Father is well pleased with *all* that his Son is about to do and will accomplish from this point forward. Here at Christ's baptism, the Father is pronouncing his divine favour on his Son's passion and suffering; on his crucifixion and burial; on his resurrection from the dead and on his ascension into heaven. All that our Lord does for humanity and for our salvation is wonderfully symbolised in his baptism, when he stands, as it were, *in our place* before God. And God is indeed pleased with Jesus' mission and work. 'You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased.' God the Father says this about his Son, and he never tires of saying so.

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<sup>7</sup> Although Mk 1. 10 says that Jesus 'saw the Spirit descending on him like a dove', Jn 1. 32 indicates that John the Baptist also saw this manifestation. It can therefore be inferred that the baptism of Jesus was a public event accessible to others and that those present (cf. Lk 3. 21) were able to witness these signs given by the other members of the Trinity.

<sup>8</sup> The heavenly voice combines phrases from the Old Testament: 'my Son' (Ps 2. 7, the Davidic king as the adopted son of God); the 'one whom I love' or 'beloved' (Gen 22. 2, Isaac); and 'with you I am well pleased' (Is 42. 1, 44. 2, God's Servant). At the outset of his ministry, Jesus is identified in terms of biblical figures that provide prototypes for his own person and activity.

<sup>9</sup> All of God's righteous requirements for the Messiah are fully met in Jesus. The phrase that Jesus' baptism was undertaken to fulfil all righteousness (Matt 3. 15) is to be interpreted as alluding to the way of life that should characterise someone baptised by John ('producing good fruit'; cf. Matt 3. 8 and also Lk 3. 7-14). Jesus, who was fully righteous, was indeed able to demonstrate this type of life.

<sup>10</sup> Cf. also Matt 12. 17- 21 and 17. 5.

But in this thundering (no pun intended) voice from heaven, the voice of God the Father not only expresses his approval of Jesus; it also reveals his identity. Jesus was, and is to be recognised as the very Son of God. His true and eternal identity is made manifest at his baptism, at the very beginning of his public ministry. And as the Father reveals the identity of his Son for all to hear, we suddenly realise this baptism is one of the few and mighty occasions in the Scriptures where God is present in all of his Triune fulness: Father, Son and Holy Spirit.<sup>11</sup>

A moment ago, I said that Christ's baptism was an example to those of us who are his followers, and this is true. But it might be more appropriate to say that when we are baptised, we are not merely following our Lord's example; we are making a fundamental statement about our entry into Christianity and our entry into Christian life.

At whatever age we are baptised, we (and those who supported us and spoke for us, if we were baptised as infants) made a statement about our desire to be united with Jesus. Just as our Lord showed solidarity with humanity at his baptism, at our baptism, we indicate our desire to engage in a life of solidarity with him.

We, who are crippled by our own sinfulness, come to baptism so that we may receive the washing of rebirth and renewal. The water that is used at our

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<sup>11</sup> Only in a few places in Scriptures do we have such a picture of the Triune God. The first is surely at Creation (Gen 1), where the Father speaks; the Pre-Incarnate Word (Jesus) also has a role (cf. Jn 1. 3 'through him all things were made'); and the Spirit too is present, moving over the waters and bringing life to Adam's cold clay. A second is on the occasion of the Transfiguration of Jesus (Mk 9), when the Spirit of God is present in the form of a cloud enveloping Jesus, Moses and Elijah and when God the Father speaks.

baptism is an ‘outward sign’ of an ‘invisible, gracious work of God’<sup>12</sup>, the cleansing and the purification that we receive when we decide to turn away from our sin and to *turn toward Christ*. But baptism symbolises not only a turning *toward* Christ; it symbolises a turning *with* Christ and *in* Christ. It is *in union with Jesus* that we turn in the direction that our Lord chose at his own baptism.<sup>13</sup>

In our baptism, we are united to Christ’s baptism. In our baptism, we are united to Christ and to all that he has accomplished for us and for our salvation. Just as Jesus’ identity was proclaimed at his baptism, in our own baptism, we mark the fact that *we* are given a *new identity* in Christ; we mark our decision to follow Christ on a lifelong journey; we mark our turning away from sin, toward Christ and a new life; and we mark the fact that we are brothers and sisters in Christ and that we are all united in him.

At the very beginning of this talk, I said that baptism has huge consequences for Christian doctrine, which we have just seen. As we close, I would like to say something about the consequences of baptism on Christian practise. What does it mean exactly to ‘live the baptismal life’?

Certainly, when we take our baptismal vows, we cannot help but be struck by the effect that they are intended to have on the way we live our lives. As we decide to be united with our Lord and to engage in a life of solidarity with him, we pledge to ‘reject the devil; to renounce the deceit and corruption of evil; to

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<sup>12</sup> It is on this basis that baptism is considered as a Sacrament.

<sup>13</sup> The Apostle Paul expressed it this way in his letter to the Romans: ‘...Don’t you know that all of us who were baptised into Christ Jesus were baptised into his death? We were therefore buried with him through baptism into death in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, we too may live a new life. If we have been united with him like this in his death, we will certainly also be united with him in his resurrection.’ (6. 3-5).

repent of our sins; to turn to Christ as Saviour; to submit to him as Lord; and to come to him who is the way, the truth and the life'. Today, as we celebrate the Feast of the Baptism of Christ at the beginning of 2016, may I encourage us all to consider afresh the seriousness and the solemnity of the promises that we made initially at our baptism and perhaps at our confirmation.

But I would like to encourage you further. When we come to baptism, and when we undertake to live a baptismal life, it is not a one-way street. At our baptism, God, in his Triune majesty and glory, is present with us, just as he was at his Son's baptism; and at this very important, life-changing moment, as we enter into Christian life, God takes the initiative and confers his grace upon us. Indeed, it is he who has been calling us to take this step from the very beginning; and as we respond to his call, we become the recipients of his grace.

And there's more. Since we are united with Christ in our baptism, at the beginning of our Christian journey, and *at every step that we take along the way*, we hear the same voice that Jesus heard. God also says to us, 'You are my child, whom I love; with you I am well pleased.'

As we begin this New Year, I hope that you will do me a favour. Rather, I hope that you will do yourself a favour. Write that message from heaven on your heart. Write it on your hand as though it were notes for an exam. Wherever you find yourself, whether it be in the low or the high places of life, listen carefully; and by God's grace, that message will sound forth.

It may come as a whisper; it may come as a shout; and some days it will even sound like a murmur; but that message will always be there, because it is a

message to us that God does not withdraw or eradicate. God keeps on saying it, whether or not we choose to listen: ‘You are my child, whom I love; with you I am well pleased.’

Amen.