

Epiphany 1A 2020 SSP

Isaiah 42:1-9; Acts 10:34-43; St. Matthew 3:13-17

In the Name of God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Ghost. Amen.

The Baptism of Jesus by John the Baptist in the River Jordan is told by all four evangelists, each with his own perspective. Today it is Saint Matthew, whose account raises a question that might well occur to us. Jesus comes to John to be baptized, and John would have prevented him, saying, “I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?” John’s baptism was a washing from sin and a sign of repentance.

Jesus’s answer to John the Baptist is profound. “Let it be so now; for thus it is fitting for us to fulfill all righteousness.” John seems in some way to understand, because at this he consents and baptizes Jesus. For years I have pondered what Jesus means here, and I believe this is the meaning: Jesus by being baptized is identifying, showing solidarity, with sinners. Even though Jesus is free from sin, he does this, because, as he says elsewhere, I have come not to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance. We will come back to this at the end.

Meanwhile, what happens as Jesus is baptized? There is a great epiphany, a manifestation or revelation, of God the Holy Trinity. The heavens are opened. The Spirit descends on Jesus in the form of a dove. A voice from heaven says, This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased. God manifests himself as the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. Then the Holy Spirit drives Jesus into the wilderness where his Sonship, his filial relationship with the Father, will be tested before he begins his ministry. This anticipates what will happen, when the devil returns for the opportunity presented at the time of Jesus’s Passion and Sacrifice.

Jesus’s relationship with God, his nature and identity as the Son, have all been the case from the beginning. They do not begin at his Baptism; they are manifested by the epiphany at his

Baptism. Jesus's Sonship actually has no beginning, because he is eternally begotten of the Father before time. When Jesus was conceived through the faith of his mother, the blessed Virgin Mary, as she heard and received the Word of God, he was the incarnate Son of God. When he was in her womb, when he was born, when he was an infant and then a youth, onward as he grew up, Jesus was the Son of God and as a human being he was learning and undergoing his Sonship at each stage of his life.

Now, at his Baptism, Jesus is ready to begin his public ministry, and he does so by identifying with sinners. He does not sin, but he shows utter solidarity, he reveals the divine compassion, for the fallen human race. He is the sinner's truest Friend because he has something of the most precious value to give us. This will become more and more evident as Jesus moves through his ministry. As Saint Peter says in our lesson from Acts, he goes about doing good and healing all who were oppressed by the devil, for God was with him. The prophet Isaiah, many centuries before Jesus, in our first lesson foresees these works of the Messiah who is to come.

Sin is separation from God. As the apostle says, the wages of sin is death, because it cuts us off from life, which God wishes us to have eternally. The saddest words in the Bible for me come in Genesis. Having said it is not good for man to be alone, God creates Eve for Adam. Then they separate themselves from God by eating the forbidden fruit; and they hide when they hear the voice of the Lord God walking in the garden in the cool of the day. Whereupon God says, Where are you? They are alone, again, in their own self-imposed exile from grace. Sin is our great corporate and personal enemy, and it is sin's isolation from which Jesus came to save us. As he does his works, he heals the sick, makes the blind to see and the deaf to hear and the lame to walk, raises the dead, and give good news to the poor. He restores sinners to life and fellowship with God. All these are signs, epiphanies, of our Lord and Savior.

The apostle Paul, in his second letter to the Corinthians, describes this restoration to life wonderfully (II Corinthians 6:16-21) when he says that if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old (sin) has passed away, and the new (grace in Jesus) has come. Not only that, but Jesus has given to his disciples, to his church, this very ministry of reconciliation. It is what the Eucharist this morning manifests as we take part in the life-giving Body of Christ. We beseech you on behalf of Christ, says the apostle, be reconciled to God. And then he plumbs the depths of the Good News of Jesus Christ with these words: For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.

This takes us back as I said to what Jesus said to John the Baptist about his being baptized as though he were a sinner. Let it be so now, for it is fitting for us to fulfill all righteousness. What happened on the cross? God made Christ to be sin who knew no sin. What happened at the empty tomb? God raised Jesus from the dead, and vindicated him as Lord and Savior. So Jesus has opened up his relationship to God to us, in order to restore us to fellowship, actually to re-integrate us into the Holy Trinity who revealed himself as Jesus was baptized. How can we fail to accept that invitation?

In the Name of God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Ghost. Amen.