

The Feast of the Baptism of the Lord

Today we commemorate the baptism of the Lord: that moment when Jesus entered the waters of the Jordan to be baptized by John the Baptist. This feast in which we celebrate the manifestation of Christ to the world also marks the end of the Christmas season.

The Feast of the Lord's Baptism, however, raises a puzzling question: If Jesus is the *sinless* Son of God, why did he submit to John's baptism for the repentance of sins? What need was there for Jesus to be baptized if he did not commit sin?

The writers of the New Testament were aware of this problem. For example, when Jesus presents himself for baptism, John the Baptist objects: "I need to be baptized by you, and yet you are coming to me?" In response to John's objection, Jesus replies, "Allow it for now, for thus is it fitting for us to fulfill all righteousness" (Matt 3:14-15). By the word "righteousness" Jesus means *God's plan for salvation*. And so Jesus tells John: "It is God's plan for the salvation of the world that you baptize me; therefore, let it be."

By submitting to John's baptism, Jesus affirms John's ministry whereby John calls Israel to repentance. By humbling himself to be baptized, the sinless Son of God provides his contemporaries with an example to follow. He says, "Be baptized by John and repent because the kingdom of God is at hand." Jesus' baptism marked the beginning of his ministry. For it was at that moment that the powerful Spirit of God descended upon him, empowering him to proclaim that the kingdom of God was making its appearance in his ministry.

Our baptism is similar to and different from Jesus' baptism. On the one hand, our baptism is similar to Jesus' baptism inasmuch as it is part of God's redemptive plan for our salvation. By being baptized, we enter into God's plan of salvation. We join a multitude of Christians who have been baptized into God's redemptive plan.

On the other hand, our baptism is different from Jesus' baptism inasmuch as we are baptized into the name of Jesus Christ. By our baptism, we enter into the mystery of Christ's death and resurrection. With Christ we die to the power of sin over our lives, and we enter into a new life made possible by Christ's resurrection. St. Paul reminds us of this when he writes, "Are you not aware that we who were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death?" (Rom 6:3).

Baptism, then, is more than a washing away of sins, it is a participation in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. When we enter the waters of baptism, we are buried with Christ. And when we rise from the waters of baptism, we rise with Christ into new and eternal life. The result is that we are a new creation in Christ; we are sons and daughters of our heavenly Father.

But if this is the new situation in which we find ourselves, we ought to live accordingly. This is why Saint Paul writes, "If then you were raised with Christ, see what is above, where Christ is seated at the right hand of God. Think of what is above, not of what is on earth" (Col 3:1-2).

The Baptism of Jesus marked a new phase in his life: the beginning of his preaching about the kingdom of God. Our own baptism marks a new phase in our lives as well: a life lived in accordance with our new dignity as sons and daughters of God, brothers and sisters of our elder brother, Jesus Christ.

Father Matera