

FEAST OF THE BAPTISM OF THE LORD

St. Luke 3:15-16, 21-22

With this feast of the Baptism of the Lord we mark the close of Christmastide and the beginning of Ordinary Time. The thirty-four weeks in which the Church celebrates the mystery of Christ in all aspects.

In Advent we prepared ourselves for the coming of Christ, remembering His birth two-thousand years ago and in expectation of His coming again. At Christmas we celebrated the glory of God made incarnate—the revelation of God in Jesus Christ. At Epiphany we celebrated the revelation of God to the Gentiles—to the people of all the world as imaged in the Magi or three wise men. At this, the Baptism of the Lord, the manifestation of God on earth and the beginning of His mission to draw all men and women back to Himself is fulfilled.

Each of these three events—Christmas, Epiphany, and the Baptism—is a theophany or the realisation of God's in-breaking into human history. First with the birth of God as a child, second with the star that led the Magi to the infant Christ, and today by the voice from heaven and the appearance of the Holy Spirit in the shape of a dove. These things tells us of the intimacy of God and His absolute desire to live with us so that we might live with Him.

We believe that we are baptised for the remission of our sins, in particular, original sin. Our Lord, however, despite being fully human, like us in all things, was free of sin, so it is argued that there was no need for Him to be baptised. But the Lord sought to be baptised because He identified completely with the human condition; He felt our struggle with pain and suffering and death, our alienation from God and from each other and the isolation and loneliness we so often feel. He, as God, desired to share our life and our death with us so that by His utter reliance on His father, we might share in His divinity just as He shared

in our humanity. Through His Baptism by St. John in the waters of the Jordan River, He accepted His human condition so that we might recognise our condition and so become completely and wholly reliant on the grace of God as we were intended to from the beginning. In part it was the way that God sought to restore us to our original condition, to the life He had always intended for us to live—in peace, in joy, and without death.

But God could no more ignore the reality of our fallen world any more than we could and so in Christ He does not remove sin, suffering and death but pulls us through so that sin, suffering and death are not ends in themselves but means to an end and are transformed so that sin is an opportunity for grace, suffering an opportunity for joy, and death an opportunity for eternal life. The Lord's acceptance of Baptism was His acceptance of the human condition, which by His life, passion and death was transformed by the resurrection—the moment when God showed Himself to be greater than all things, even death itself. So with our Baptism we share in the life, passion and death of the Lord so that we might share in His resurrection. The world of sin and pain and suffering into which we are born is transformed by the sacrament of Baptism as Heaven opens above us as the waters are poured over us—just as Heaven did when the waters were poured over the Lord.

The sacrament of Baptism does not end corruption and sin and pain and suffering. We still move through each day with, at times, great joy, and at times, great pain, and for most of the time, with some difficulty, always feeling as though something is not quite right. What the sacrament of Baptism does do, however, is shut up corruption and sin and pain and suffering as ends in themselves and makes possible the transformation of these things into joy.

There is a story of a man who lived seventeen-hundred years ago called Cyprian of Carthage who wrote to his friend Donatus: "It's a bad world, Donatus, in which we live. But right in the middle of it I have discovered a quiet and holy group of people. They are people who have found a happiness

that is a thousand times more joyful than all the pleasures of our sinful lives. These people are despised and persecuted, but it does not matter to them. They are Christians... and I am one of them." Before our Baptism the Holy Spirit dwells outside of us, but with the sacrament of Baptism the Holy Spirit dwells forever within us.

Just as the Baptism of the Lord marked the beginning of His public ministry so our Baptism marks the beginning of our participation in the mission of the Church. Each and everyone of us, by virtue of our Baptism, must work with God in the Church for the creation, salvation and sanctification of ourselves, of others and of the whole world. It is not up to others, it is up to us. Baptism grants us in Christ eternal life, but it also demands that we work with Christ in this life so that we may live not for this world but for the world to come.