

THE BAPTISM OF OUR LORD

January 8 & 9, 2011

“Jesus – God’s Son and Servant”

Matthew 3:13-17

In a fresco painting from the thirteenth century, the artist depicts how it might have been on the banks of the Jordan River that day so long ago when Jesus was baptized. Jesus stands waist deep in the water and John stands on the shore with a seashell in his hand pouring water over Jesus’ head. The water seems to cloak Jesus from head to waist. And over his head is a halo and above the halo is a dove descending from heaven. It’s been said that this painting is so realistic that you can almost hear the voice from heaven saying, “This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well-pleased” – words that are not so coincidentally reminiscent of today’s Old Testament lesson – “Behold my servant, whom I uphold, my chosen, in whom my soul delights.”

Last Thursday we celebrated the festival of the Epiphany and today we begin the Epiphany season by focusing our attention for a few moments on the baptism of our Lord. And it’s a good thing that we do so for if epiphany means “to make someone or something known or manifest” and, in that, to make known or manifest the purpose or meaning of that someone or something, then nowhere is the Epiphany of our Lord better seen or better understood than in his baptism. It’s in his baptism that we see who this Jesus, whose birth we celebrated just weeks ago, really is and what he has come to do and, in that, because we belong to him by virtue of our baptism into his name, we see who we really are and what we are to do as well.

Today’s Old Testament lesson together with today’s gospel lesson, especially the key words of those lessons, reveal who Jesus really is and what he has come to do. Those key words are Son and Servant.

Now, in the Old Testament, the word “son” refers to someone who is more than just the biological descendant of another. It means one to whom authority and power is given. Take David for example. He had a number of male offspring but when his reign was about to come to an end he decided to choose one of them to be his successor. And he chose Solomon – to whom was given the title “The son of David” – that is, here is the one who has the power and authority of David. Likewise in Psalm 2, the people of Israel are called the “sons of God” because God had chosen them to be the ones through whom He would exercise His power and authority in this world, especially in bringing about the salvation He promised in the beginning. So when Jesus is called “Son,” he is being identified as the one to whom God is giving His power and authority to accomplish this long-promised salvation. But more than that, when He is called “Son” he is being identified as God Himself come in the flesh – God incarnate – the very stuff of Christmas. That’s why Jesus is called the “only-begotten Son of the Father.” You see, Jesus is one of a kind. He and he alone is truly the Son of God.

But why has he come? Why has God become incarnate in this world? What has he come to do?

That's where the second word comes in – "Servant." Isaiah used it in our Old Testament lesson to describe what God's Son had come to do. The servant he describes is self-effacing, tender, concerned with the weak and the oppressed, and willing to give himself totally for others. Certainly, Jesus' life and ministry tell us that he is that kind of servant. He himself said, "I have come not to be served but to serve and to give my life as a ransom for many." His service is best seen in his sacrifice on the cross for the sins of the world.

Jesus – God's Son and Servant – is made known to the world in the flesh come to serve the world by giving his life as a ransom for the world. So now, we, who have received his coming by faith and who have been ransomed from sin, death and the power of the devil through his life, death and resurrection, and who have been made his own through our baptism into his name have been made sons and servants as well. Oh, not quite in the same way as Jesus for we are not by nature God in the flesh nor can we save the world but rather now by virtue of our adoption as sons in our baptism we are his servants to make known his salvation to the ends of the earth. That's why the Bible calls us "a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people."

And, you see baptism – Jesus' and ours – is at the heart of it all. As baptism was ordination into ministry for Jesus, so it is for us as well. In the Jordan, Jesus was ordained as Son and Servant to accomplish his God-given ministry of saving the whole world. So, too, in our baptism into his name we have been ordained to be sons and servants as well – not to save the whole world but to represent the one who has with all his power and authority and to proclaim the salvation he has won for all to the ends of the earth.

Truly, Jesus' baptism was an epiphany – a making known of who he is and what he has come to do. And so, too, our baptism is an epiphany – a making known of who we are and what we are called to do – especially as we live out our baptism day to day.

In the baptistery of the Lateran Basilica in Rome there is a fifth century inscription that runs around the room high above the baptismal font. It says, "Here is the source of life which gushed from the wound of Christ and washes the whole universe." And so, as we meditate not only on Jesus' baptism this day but also on our own, may we too be moved to say, "here is the source of my life, our life together, which gushed from the wound of Christ and has cleansed us to be God's sons and servants in our world today."

And may God pour out His Holy Spirit upon us once again this day and in so doing may He empower us to live up to our calling just as Jesus lived up to his. May God grant this to us all for Jesus' sake. Amen.