

8th January 2008

The Baptism of Christ

Canon Barry Naylor

This feast forms part of the great trilogy of events associated with the Epiphany – along with the Manifestation to the Magi and the Wedding Feast at Cana. The Baptism of Jesus doesn't always have a high profile in our thinking but it was an important occasion. It was an event reported in all four Gospels – unlike the stories of the shepherds, the wise men, or the birth at Bethlehem – the Evangelists clearly saw it as an important event.

Why did Jesus need to be baptised? John was calling people to be baptised, as a sign of repentance, a sign of a person wishing to renounce, and turn away from, sinful living. If Jesus was without sin, why did **he** need to be baptised?

He submitted to John, although John pointed out that he was not worthy and he suggested that it was he who should have been baptised by Jesus. It was, partly, a sign of Jesus' humility – he was the one who came to serve, not to be served, not to throw his weight around. He was the One who, even though he was truly and utterly God, assumed our fragile human nature. He did not consider himself too grand, or important, to stoop and be immersed by John in the muddy waters of the River Jordan.

Jesus' whole ministry and life was to do the will of his Father and obey him. His baptism was a public manifestation - an Epiphany - of him submitting to God's will – "to fulfil all righteousness", as Matthew expressed it. John was calling the people to repent and be baptised. Like so many authentic prophets before him, the religious and social establishment attacked him, questioning his credentials and credibility. They did not want a religion that disturbed them. Jesus' acceptance of baptism at John's hands was a confirmation that John was a man sent by God, to whom people should listen and respond. Jesus was baptised, not because he was a sinner, but to show that what John was asking of the people, was God's will. Jesus showed people how to respond to John's message – his baptism was an act of solidarity with those who were seeking to walk faithfully in God's ways. His baptism reinforces the message of the Incarnation – a message of divine solidarity with the human race in the working out of his purposes.

At his baptism, Jesus was anointed with the Spirit, which traditionally is pictured as coming down in the form of a dove. A voice was heard: "This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well-pleased" – recalling the beginning of the first Song of the Suffering Servant in Isaiah chapter 42, which was our OT reading today. His baptismal experience set Jesus on his course – the course that would lead to the cross.

The Spirit which descended on Jesus at his baptism was not to give him a cosy feeling of contentment and self-satisfaction, sometimes associated with religious experience. No – the baptismal Spirit led him into the desert to battle with demonic forces in their many manifestations, to be tempted, to be challenged. This is a vital work of the Spirit which was poured upon Jesus; the same Spirit is also released in our lives – at our Baptism, at our Confirmation and every time we receive the Holy Communion. It was the self-same Spirit that motivated the preaching of the Baptist – a forceful, challenging Spirit. It challenges; it also equips us to face the challenge – as we saw in John and, above all, in Jesus.

Jesus explained, at the beginning of his public ministry, just why the Spirit had been given to him. Again he used verses from the Book of Isaiah – this time from chapter 62, further echoing the theme of the Servant Songs:

*“The spirit of the Lord has come upon me,
for he has anointed me
to bring good news to the afflicted.
He has sent me to proclaim liberty to captives,
sight to the blind,
to let the oppressed go free,
to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favour.”*

Jesus’ anointing with the Spirit at his baptism – equipped him to announce God’s desires for his people and identified him with all who wish to respond faithfully to God and these purposes. The agenda of the Spirit, Jesus tells us, was a radical agenda, challenging accepted norms and mores. If we wish to be faithful to the Father, then this must be our agenda, also, if we are to be a people anointed with the Spirit of the Living God, the same Spirit that descended upon Jesus at his Baptism.

Jesus was anointed with the Spirit of the living God and in his life and death he remained faithful to the guiding of that Spirit.

May the Church today, and each one of us, in 2008, and in the years that lie ahead, be faithful to our anointing with the Spirit – it will lead us to the Cross but the Cross is the door to eternal life.

“This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased”:

as we are empowered by the same Spirit, and respond in faithfulness, may God be well pleased with you and with me.

To Jesus who lives and reigns with the Father in the unity of the Holy Spirit, be ascribed all honour, might, glory and majesty for all eternity. Amen